

Collective Improvisation: Conversation, Interaction and
Direction in the Music of Ornette Coleman and
Jason Rigby

by

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Introduction

My involvement in the tradition of jazz began at a very early age when I first was introduced to John Coltrane's album *Giant Steps* as well as Sonny Rollins' album *Tenor Madness*. These two albums completely changed the way I perceived music and the saxophone and led me to spend the next several years of my musical education dedicated to learning the intricacies of jazz music, specifically the bebop language and techniques used to navigate the chord changes of several different styles of jazz. I was certainly aware of free jazz artists and the concept of free improvisation¹ yet I didn't understand it completely and chose to concentrate on more accessible artists and their music.

During the summer of 2007, while I was working at the New York Summer Music Festival, I was able to meet and work with a saxophone player named Jason Rigby. While I was initially unaware of his work as a composer, listening in depth to his first album, *Translucent Space*, had a similar impact on my conception of music, jazz and the saxophone as both *Giant Steps* and *Tenor Madness*. While the compositions aren't as open or as free as those on *The Sage*² the compositional concepts, performance techniques and incredible improvisation displayed in *Translucent Space* caused me to re-evaluate my understanding of jazz music and, more importantly, improvisation and improvisational music.

¹ Free improvisation, in this context, describes a group of musicians collectively creating music with limited composed (or pre-defined) melodic, harmonic or rhythmic structures. Free jazz uses this concept within the instrumentation of a jazz ensemble.

² Rigby's second album

Through devouring the music in *Translucent Space* and brief conversations with Jason I was able to get more of a sense of the compositional process as well as the performance techniques associated with these compositions. This led me to search for other musicians who embraced free improvisation in their music such as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Paul Motian, and Sun Ra. While each of these artists provided thought-provoking and incredibly interesting music it didn't seem to have the same impact on me as the music of Jason Rigby. Revisiting my collection of Ornette Coleman, on the other hand, led to many late-night listening sessions and several hours at the piano trying to discover the inner workings of what I was hearing. Two of Ornette's albums, *Free Jazz* and *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, jumped out from the rest as two completely different conceptions that retained similar musical philosophies and direction. Listening heavily to Ornette Coleman, as well as Jason's recorded material, eventually led me to decide to research their lives and music and the parallels that exist in their compositional and performance-related ideals.

In Chapter one, I attempt to define and contextualize "collective improvisation" in order to distinguish Rigby's and Coleman's music from other forms of jazz (although it is important to remember that both artists are deeply rooted in the traditions of jazz and have impacted and continue to impact the lives of new generations of jazz musicians.) I also outline certain arguments about improvisation and composition that will aid the discussion of these two saxophonists' compositions and recordings as well as my own compositions. Chapters two and three discuss two of Ornette Coleman's albums (*Free Jazz* and *The Shape of Jazz to Come*) as well as his impact on several prominent jazz figures. In these chapters I attempt to describe

Ornette's approach to both compositional and performance elements for each album. To attempt to highlight Ornette's originality and creativeness I discuss the makeup of the band, the role each instrument takes on, the form of each piece, improvisational material as well as composed elements of the piece and compare these elements to other jazz compositions.

In Chapters four, five and six I discuss Jason Rigby's style of saxophone playing as well as improvisation and the compositions found on *Translucent Space* and *The Sage*. I break down several of his compositions in a similar manner that I used with Coleman's music in order to draw parallels between the two artists, continue to define the concept of collective improvisation and show specifically where I drew inspiration and ideas for my own compositions and performance-related ideas.

Definition of Terms

Western harmony and analysis using music theory based on the diatonic system must only be considered a tool for discussing this music.

A jazz standard, in its strictest definition, is a well-known and often-played song that comes the “Great American Songbook” (a collection of songs mainly from Broadway or Hollywood between about 1920 and 1950) or composers within other sub-genres of jazz such as Dixieland, Swing, Bossa Nova or Bebop.

The word comping describes the rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment played by a rhythm instrument (guitar or piano, for example) or by the drummer behind the melody or a soloist. In a similar sense, background figures are played mainly behind soloists. Backgrounds are essentially composed or improvised comping figures that are played by multiple members of the ensemble.

A bass line in jazz music is usually referred to as a “walking” bass line and features mostly scalar or step-wise motion which is used to clearly outline chord changes as well as dictating and enforcing a strong sense of time and motion. Bass lines in jazz are improvised and change based on the energy or intensity level of the song or solo section. A bass ostinato, on the other hand, is a composed bass line that is repeated continuously throughout a composition.

Bebop vocabulary refers to the phrase construction and musical language developed mainly during the 1940's. It is comprised of mostly diatonic motion with chromatic passing and neighboring tones used to clearly outline chord changes while spontaneous composing melodic material.

Chapter 1: Experimental, Improvisational and “Coherent” Music

Improvisational music has existed as long as people have been coming together to play in an ensemble setting. It is a group of people playing a composition with elements of improvisation or freely improvising together with no composed material. In reference to improvising within the genre of jazz, Gunther Schuller asserts “improvisation, if it is not absolutely essential to jazz, is considered to be the heart and soul of jazz by most jazz musicians and authorities.”³ Improvising in music is spontaneously composing melodic, harmonic and rhythmic material by drawing on one’s own personal musical background. The nature of improvised material is often influenced by its context, the phrases played by other musicians and the overarching feeling and direction of the composition. This notion of improvisation and conversation in music is the guiding force behind the emotive and speech-inflected qualities of improvisational music, especially jazz.

An element that is ubiquitous in the music of both Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby is collective improvisation. This concept can be and is applied to many different facets of composition and performance in music. While Barry Kernfield limits this label to the simultaneous improvisation of wind players in the New Orleans style and improvisation of several or all members of a group playing in a free-jazz style,⁴ I perceive that the essence of collective improvisation can be found in the spirituals and plantation songs of 19th century African American slaves,⁵ the kritis of karnatik music or even at a Phish concert. Yet it’s within the context of the small jazz

³ Schuller, 865

⁴ Kernfield 120

⁵ See Allen, Ware, Garrison.

ensemble where one finds the largest selection of documented collective improvisation through recordings. In this context it then becomes more important to discover the difference and draw certain lines (as arbitrary as they may be) between an improvised solo and collective improvisation.

The jazz quartet, a basic and widely used iteration of the small jazz ensemble, provides a perfect framework for both collective improvisation as well as improvised solos. In this case, this hypothetical quartet consists of piano, bass, drums and saxophone; a typical piano-based rhythm section with a horn player. In a situation in which one member of the group is playing an improvised solo (in this case over a jazz standard in 4/4 time) then the other members of the group must either be laying out or performing specific roles behind the soloist in order for the definition (improvised solo) to stand true. Ingrid Monson suggests that there are two roles that musicians can take if they aren't soloing or laying out (during a solo section). These are keeping time and comping.⁶ Yet both of these roles have improvisational characteristics. If the bass player is keeping time by playing a walking bass line⁷ aren't they also improvising? While they are outlining chord changes and providing a foundation for the soloist they are also improvising a creative and functional melody. The same idea can be applied to comping. If a pianist is comping behind a saxophone player, for example, they are following a specific form with composed chord changes yet they still chooses the voicings and improvises rhythmic patterns. The drummer could also be comping rhythmic patterns on the snare drum or creating fills or hits, which are improvised. So if this quartet is playing over "Stella by Starlight" and the saxophone

⁶ Monson 26

⁷ Monson 29

player is playing an improvised solo while the other three members of the band either comp or keep time, technically, it is collective improvisation. This would mean that just about any jazz recording ever made would have at least some collective improvisation. We must therefore look into the compositional elements present in collective improvisation to find a more precise definition.

In returning to the saxophone solo over “Stella by Starlight,” while the three other musicians are taking specific roles with undeniable improvisational elements they are still restricted by certain aspects of the song. The form, melody, chord changes, time signature and key of the song are clearly defined by the composer while the ensemble chooses a specific tempo prior to playing the tune. These constraints on the musicians create the line between an improvised solo and collective improvisation. Therefore I will define collective improvisation as improvising musicians playing a composition that lacks or de-emphasizes form, chord changes and/or tempo. These compositional elements are spontaneously composed by the musicians, relying on their own creativity and improvisational skill, in order to explore the composition as well as develop it and give it new meaning and life. This style of music creates an incredible group dynamic as each improviser’s musical personality and style adds to and enhances the ensemble sound. Analysis of recordings of two saxophonist-composers who both embrace the freedom of collective improvisation will aid the search for a deeper understanding of its meaning and its role in the history of jazz.

Gunther Schuller is a historian and performer of jazz as well as being a prolific composer. He also was a friend of Ornette Coleman’s and composed works

specifically for him in the late 50's and early 60's.⁸ While his writings are sometimes perceived as controversial, especially within the realm of jazz, his observations and conceptual models in the genre are indispensable and aid our understanding of jazz. In his book Musings, Schuller introduces the idea of “musical coherence” in an improvised solo in jazz.⁹ Vijay Iyer quickly and efficiently sums his argument up by saying that Schuller “asserted that the musical “coherence” of a jazz solo – present, he claimed, only in the work of figures such as Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and Charlie Parker – could be proven using the standard “reduction” tools of Western music analysis.”¹⁰ After reading Schuller’s ideas on “coherency” in jazz improvisation I immediately thought of an album released in 2005 (which most certainly conflicts with Schuller’s ideas.) This album is Peter Eldridge’s *Decorum* and I’m specifically referencing Joel Frahm’s tenor saxophone solo on the tune “Sunday Driver.” In speaking of Coleman Hawkins’ improvisational style, Schuller praises such things as his wonderfully constructed linear/melodic phrases, his ability to use the entire range of the saxophone and his intensely rhythmic style.¹¹ All of these elements certainly fit into the idea of musical “coherency” within the context of jazz improvisation. By studying the first eight bars of Frahm’s solo on “Sunday Driver”, we find all of the same elements of improvisation and soloing that Schuller praised Hawkins of possessing: superb phrase construction, forceful and varied rhythmic patterns as well as using the entire range of the saxophone. There are four distinct phrases, each taking up approximately two bars, that distinctly outline the chord

⁸ Carnovale. Pgs 6, 10, 13.

⁹ Schuller, *Musings*

¹⁰ Iyer, Vijay. “Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation”

¹¹ Schuller, *Swing Era*. 426-428.

changes and also have melodic qualities. I believe that this excerpt is a perfect example of Schuller's "musical coherency." I will be using this concept further when discussing the improvisational techniques of both Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby. While Schuller's particular definition of musical coherency is somewhat limited and narrow-minded, it is an important and relevant concept that helps us understand where Coleman and Rigby's music comes from and how their music is related.

It is impossible to discuss the work of Ornette Coleman or Jason Rigby without discussing the idea of experimental music. This concept means different things to different people, but the fundamentals of experimenting in music can be applied to a wide range of situations. John Cage, in defining experimental music, declares that the composer becomes a listener and sounds replace music while doors are opened to "sounds that happen to be in the environment."¹² In Cage's experimental music one finds true randomness. The composer becomes a transcriber as chance operations (such as rolling dice) inform the organization of sounds, notes or tonalities (when composing for instruments). In other cases, a composition that contains nothing but silence leaves space for noises made by the audience or sounds of nature. A composer of experimental music "may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."¹³ Jason Rigby, on the other hand, takes an improviser's view of experimental music. "The idea of experimental/improvised music is that you're

¹² Cage. 7-8.

¹³ Cage. 10.

creating in the moment.”¹⁴ His compositions, which he refers to as from the “Downtown Scene” and as having experimental and improvisational elements, are “drastically different each night.”¹⁵ In the performance of Rigby’s music the element of chance lies in the group’s improvisation, conversation and overall vibe. Rigby asserts that reacting improvisationally to another’s musical ideas embraces Cage’s methods of chance and randomness while still allowing specific choices to be made by each performer in directing the group sound.

Understanding and analyzing the music of Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby would be impossible without knowledge of the history of jazz, improvisational music and experimental music, especially as their music becomes aleatoric (i.e. Coleman’s album *Free Jazz*.) Referring to their music as “free jazz,” “avant-garde” or “out” can be dangerous as these terms can limit our perceptions. On the other hand, exploring the illogical and often vague terminology used to describe music will, in the long run, aid in providing a framework for discussing exactly what is going on in Ornette’s and Rigby’s music. It is through the work of these two saxophonist-composers that we can understand the impact of jazz history on the compositions and performances of these two different artists, spanning a fifty-year time period, and how Rigby is intrinsically linked to Coleman.

¹⁴ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Ornette Coleman and *The Shape of Jazz to Come*

Ornette Coleman recorded *The Shape of Jazz to Come* on May 22, 1959 with Don Cherry on cornet, Charlie Haden on bass and Billy Higgins on drums. It was recorded during the early stages of one of the most important time periods for Ornette and his group, in terms of developing a group sound and gaining recognition. In the fall of 1959 Ornette took this quartet to New York and began their regular gig at The Five Spot, a club regularly filled with some of the greatest names in jazz. It was here that John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and Charles Mingus all saw Ornette and his quartet play for the first time.¹⁶ Charlie Haden also mentions “every great painter in New York used to come, De Kooning, Larry Rivers, all the all the Ray Parker, Bob Thompson.”¹⁷ A.B. Spellman makes a somewhat bold (but certainly not unfounded) statement in saying that part of the reason that Sonny Rollins withdrew from the jazz scene for two years was due to the impact of seeing Coleman’s quartet play at The Five Spot.¹⁸ Furthermore, after being “caught off guard by the ‘free’ jazz of Ornette,” Rollins himself had fallen into “the ‘New Thing’,” much to “the horror of the conservatives who had always applauded Rollins as their hope for tradition.”¹⁹ While Sonny Rollins and Ornette Coleman were obviously different players who played their own, original music, it’s apparent that Coleman’s group and their avant-garde sound had a profound influence on a wide range of jazz artists, young and old.

¹⁶ See Litweiller.

¹⁷ Haden. PBS Interview. Ken Burns Jazz.

¹⁸ Spellman. 126.

¹⁹ Ibid. Spellman notes that Sonny Rollins’ first two LPs after his sabbatical distinctly resembled the music “that he had retired with.” It was his opening at the Village Gate (playing with Billy Higgins and Don Cherry) that marked his move into the “New Thing.”

The Five Spot gig wasn't all glory for Ornette and his fellow musicians. John Litweiller tells an interesting story about the group's time at this club. He says that Max Roach attended one of the quartet's shows to see exactly what everyone was talking about. After the set he walked back into the kitchen, where the band was, and punched Ornette square in the mouth.²⁰ Charlie Haden confirms this story when he said that someone "came back in the, in the kitchen, we were on a break, and hit Ornette in the face." He also claims that fights and arguments would break out in the club regularly and "someone set a car on fire one night."²¹ Max Roach wasn't the only big name jazz instrumentalist that was upset by the quartet's sound. Roy Eldridge claimed that Ornette was "jiving, baby" while Miles Davis alleged that "if you're talking psychologically, the man is all screwed up inside."²² Fortunately, those who didn't appreciate Ornette's music were in the minority as within the group's first year their music gained popularity and they released four LP's.²³

But what exactly about Ornette's group caused such a stir among some of the best jazz artists in New York? Spellman says that the group's effect went beyond his compositions or style of improvisation. The deepest impact the group had was that it "emancipated bass players and drummers more than it did saxophonists and trumpeters."²⁴ The idea of having bassists and drummers take the role of a metronome was challenged by the interaction of all four members of the group. While still incorporating some of the traditional roles of their respective instruments Charlie

²⁰ Litweiller. 83.

²¹ Haden.

²² Litweiller. 82.

²³ Spellman. 125.

²⁴ Spellman. 127.

Haden and Billy Higgins “played rhythms that ran counter to the horn lines and usually brought in extracompositional materials.”²⁵ By Ornette giving the rhythm players freedom from traditional accompanying roles, collective improvisation surged into their music and led their group to a new height of expression. Haden said that playing with Ornette and his group “was like being born again. And I was hearing music so much more deeply than I had ever heard.”²⁶

This philosophy of group interplay sprouted from their work on *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. This was a landmark album for both Ornette Coleman and the world of jazz. John Litweiller compares this album to Louis Armstrong’s “starring setting with the 1926-1927 Hot Five and Hot Seven” and Charlie Parker’s and Dizzie Gillespie’s “masterpieces of 1945 [that] announced to the world that bop had arrived.”²⁷ While the quartet’s time at The Five Spot was their arrival announcement to the world, the album was a culmination of musical explorations and experiments by the quartet, especially Charlie Haden’s duo sessions with Ornette.

The songs on this album are heavily rooted in the bebop tradition. With the exception of “Peace” the songs feature fast tempo, high energy romps by the rhythm section that push the improvisers to higher levels of intensity in their playing. They all follow a head-solos-head structure and display group interaction and conversation throughout. The real innovation comes in how the group treats harmony. Jason Rigby outlines how the group is innovative and creative while still displaying a strong awareness of jazz history and their audience.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Haden. KBJ, PBS Interview.

²⁷ Litweiller. 68.

One of the things that I learned listening to Ornette's group, if you take *The Shape of Jazz to Come* for instance, there are no chords, no chordal instruments, there's no piano or guitar defining a harmonic structure, some of the melodic material, the themes that they play are somewhat based in a harmonic idea, but loosely. The thing that is constant with most of the tunes on that record is the time. Charlie and Billy are not necessarily playing harmonic time but they're playing rhythmic time. And there's not any form to the tunes, but the fact that there's that element of steady tempo...is the one anchor that they can juxtapose whatever else they're doing on top of that, which is really interesting...in a lot of ways it's very accessible because of that rhythmic stability that's happening underneath it.²⁸

The fact that the group doesn't define any particular harmonic structure throughout the solo sections doesn't necessarily mean that Ornette didn't write harmonies or harmonic suggestions. In reference to the role of the bass player in his music, Ornette says that if "he's allowed to use any note that he hears to express [an] F7, then that note's going to be right because he hears it, not because he read it off the page."²⁹ Charlie Haden echoes this attitude by stating that even when Ornette wrote chord changes he wanted Haden to "make up new changes that you're [Haden] hearing from what I'm [Coleman] playing and from the tune."³⁰

This harmonic freedom extends to the soloists, as well. This is evident in Ornette's solos throughout the album and most notable on "Eventually" and "Focus on Sanity." These solos display Ornette's most distinctive improvisational quality, which is the vocal quality of his playing. He is "concerned with duplicating the sounds and emotions of the human voice on his instrument" and aims to remove his playing from the restrictions of the "mathematical formula of the well-tempered

²⁸ Rigby, Jason. 9 January 2009.

²⁹ Spellman. 124.

³⁰ Haden interview.

scale.”³¹ In “Eventually” he “moans, he shrieks, he hollers [and] he laughs”³² as Higgins and Haden push him forward. In “Focus on Sanity” Ornette takes off on a “madly yelping solo, a frenzy of terror with lashing trills and insane double-time phrases.”³³ The energy displayed on this song, by the entire group, lifts it to a new level as each player’s improvisations come together to create a united musical declaration. This explains why Ornette originally wanted to name this album “Focus on Sanity.”³⁴ Regardless of the name, this album proved to be a landmark in Ornette Coleman’s career as well as the history of jazz and improvisational music.

³¹ Goldberg. 237.

³² Ibid.

³³ Litweiller. 67.

³⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 3: *Free Jazz*

In 1960, Ornette Coleman recorded an album that not only showcased his continuing innovations in the jazz idiom but also gave a name to an entire musical movement. *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* offered a new term for music critics to use to describe this new genre of music (Free Jazz). It is easy to assume that this album contains nothing but random improvisation with no sense of form, time, melody or harmony. Yet further exploration and analysis leads to the discovery that it has all of these musical, compositional and improvisational elements and is deeply rooted in the history of swing and bebop while still pushing the limits of jazz, improvisation and the avant-garde movement.

The Octet (or Double Quartet)

Free Jazz is played by an octet of musicians, each with a distinct, individual voice. The album features Ornette Coleman on alto sax, Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, Freddie Hubbard and Don Cherry on trumpet, Charlie Haden and Scott LaFaro on Bass and Billy Higgins and Ed Blackwell on drums. This group is split up into two quartets (each containing a drummer, bassist, reed player and brass player), which are recorded onto two sides of a stereo track. In other words, one quartet is recorded on the left, the other on the right. Yet Coleman wasn't the first musician to experiment with the concept of two ensembles playing simultaneously. Charles Ives, in his fourth symphony, writes for an orchestra as if they were two marching bands walking past each other on the street. He is so diligent about this that the piece requires two conductors to perform properly as there are several occasions in which two different

time signatures and tempi are written.³⁵ In the case of *Free Jazz*, the tempo remains consistent across the two quartets allowing for more of a sense of cohesion between the two groups.

The double quartet concept creates a remarkable aesthetic and allows the listener to listen to the album in three different ways: listening to left side of the stereo track, the right side, or listening to both tracks at once. Studying the ensemble in this manner, as two quartets, provides incredible insight into *Free Jazz*. While the quartet was and continues to be a standard makeup of a small jazz ensemble, the two quartets on *Free Jazz* don't exactly follow the traditional mold. In looking at the groups of Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon and Oscar Peterson (with Clark Terry, for example) we find that these ensembles were based on a rhythm section consisting of piano, bass and drums while a horn player completed the quartet. The two quartets from *Free Jazz* are similar, but substitute another horn player for the piano thus removing the sole chordal instrument from the group. Coleman's search for complete harmonic freedom led him to, at least on *Free Jazz*, eliminate piano or guitar from his ensemble. While his later groups incorporated these instruments, they primarily played in a single-note style reflecting the type of playing of a melodic instrument and therefore contributing to Coleman's idea of group sound.

Structure in *Free Jazz*

While *Free Jazz* certainly is a collective improvisation it also has a particular form that it follows. A form that lacks a set number of bars or chord changes but still a form nonetheless. While some of the melody sections certainly have some

³⁵ Cowell, Henry. 21.

improvised elements to them they still exist as a composed part of the tune and should be viewed as such. I have broken down the tune into three melody sections (which I will call A, B and C), each having variations, and solo sections. The A section consists of the entire group collectively playing several fast phrases followed by a series of dissonant chords produced by each musician playing a note of their choice in the upper ranges of their instrument. The B section starts with similar dissonant chords to the A section yet these are played in the lower register of each respective instrument. These chords are followed by a composed melody that is played in unison by the horn players while the bassists and drummers play the same groove they play over the solo section. The C section only appears once and consists of the horn players all playing a single, unison note while each drummer emphasizes and intensifies the difference between this section and the preceding and following sections. Using these melody sections as guidelines, *Free Jazz* can be broken down into the following form: A, bass clarinet solo (Dolphy), A (variation), trumpet solo (Hubbard), B, alto saxophone solo (Coleman), B (first variation), trumpet solo (Cherry), B (second variation), bass duet with drum accompaniment, C, bass solo, A, drum duet, A (original melody out).³⁶ While *Free Jazz* might not follow the form of any particular jazz standard (such as a blues form or 32-bar AABA form) it does follow an organized path allowing the group members to have some sort of structure for their free improvisation.

³⁶ The use of the word “solo” while describing the form of *Free Jazz* is a bit misleading. For example, by claiming a section is a “bass clarinet solo” I only mean that Eric Dolphy is the first player to start improvising and maintains predominance over the other soloists both in volume and density of his phrases. But each solo section is a true collective improvisation as all members of the band interject in each other’s “solo” sections and improvise continually throughout the song.

Time

One of the most important and omnipresent aspects of jazz music is a strong sense of time. Styles, grooves, feels, rhythmic patterns and tempi might be constantly changing, but jazz is built on a foundation of strong time and a strong rhythmic sense. *Free Jazz* is no exception to this statement. John Litweiler refers to the time feel in *Free Jazz* as a “hugga-bugga shuffle rhythm” played by the basses.³⁷ This is a logical statement due to the consistent ride patterns and seemingly incessant snare drum comping by each drummer. Yet I disagree with this assessment. To attempt to break down the time feel for this album I analyzed each group separately. While it may be difficult to decipher, the two quartets are playing in the same tempo. The only difference is that the drums and bass on the left are playing a double-time, straight-eighth bebop feel compared to the single-time swing feel of the group on the right. These feels take place throughout most of the track with a few slight alterations. For example, the bass player in the right track starts playing a hemiola feel³⁸ against the drummer after responding to Eric Dolphy’s long tones starting around the twelve-minute mark in the first track. Also, the A and C melody sections temporarily lose the tempo of the rest of the tune but still maintain a strong sense of forward motion. According to Ornette Coleman, though, both Litweiller and myself are mistaken when discussing time in his music.

My music doesn’t have any real time, no metric time. It has time, but not in the sense that you can time it. It’s more like breathing, a natural, freer time...I like spread rhythm, rhythm that has a lot of freedom in it, rather than the more

³⁷ Litweiler 96

³⁸ The term hemiola is typically reserved for specific articulation over two bars of 3/4 or 3/2. In this case I’m referring to the bass player’s triplet half notes against the drummers quarter notes in the same tempo.

conventional, netted rhythm. With spread rhythm, you might tap your feet awhile, then stop, then later start tapping again. That's what I like. Otherwise, you tap your feet so much, you forget what you hear. You just hear the rhythm.³⁹

Ornette's elastic and free-flowing version of time give incredible artistic freedom and space to the artists who perform within it. This concept of time will become increasingly important in continued discussions of Ornette's work as well as Jason Rigby's work.

Improvisation

John Litweiler refers to *Free Jazz* as "a series of collective improvisations separated by composed themes,"⁴⁰ a simple, direct and entirely accurate description of the album. Out of the forty-minute track there is only approximately two minutes of composed thematic or melodic material leaving an incredible amount of space for improvisation and musical conversation. The improvisers often use the bebop language to create spontaneously composed melodies that are sometimes based on the melodies of the tune. For example, at approximately 6:14 Freddie Hubbard plays a low, quiet phrase that is based in the D-minor tonality. He then leaves a few seconds of space and, at around 6:20, plays a close variation of the same phrase an octave higher in the same key prompting a rhythmic response from Ed Blackwell. These phrases are played in with a swing-eight note feel and emphasize the root and third of the minor tonality by playing those notes on strong beats. He is clearly stating a tonality in his improvised solo and juxtaposing this harmonic idea over the harmonic and melodic ideas of the other performers in the group. Like a composed melody,

³⁹ Goldberg 239

⁴⁰ Litweiller 96

Hubbard's spontaneous composition draws upon pre-conceived and practiced material.

Yet these horizontal structures created by Hubbard's bebop phraseology disappear almost immediately. As if on cue, the other three horn players slowly start interjecting in Hubbard's solo with material that becomes increasingly more atonal and dense. Hubbard's material becomes denser, as well, and he utilizes fast runs, trills and aggressive jabs. Both drummers also increase the density of their comping and range of their instrument selection⁴¹ throughout this brief section. Thirty seconds later Cherry, Coleman and Dolphy drop out almost simultaneously as Freddie Hubbard returns to a diatonic, swing-feel phrase that horizontally outlines a Bb-major tonality. Hubbard's solo section constantly moves back and forth between the two different textures: Hubbard playing alone and mostly relying on the bebop vocabulary to create horizontal, diatonic structures and all four horn players collectively improvising all of whom using intense, fast, vertical ideas with no tonal structure as the rhythm section (drummers and bassists) plays increasingly dense patterns and lines. These different textures rarely have any buffer between them. It's as if someone flips a switch and the players' phraseology becomes atonal and dense. Joe Goldberg makes a poignant remark about the brass players on *Free Jazz* when he says "The trumpeters, especially Hubbard, hear music conventionally, and point up, by example, the terrors which await anyone not ready for freedom."⁴² While Hubbard's contribution to this album provided incredible contrast to the other players as well as inspiring entirely unique

⁴¹ Instead of simply using the ride cymbal, hi-hat, snare and bass drums the drummers at this point change cymbals, use toms and create melodic phrases (as opposed to fills) using mostly drums as opposed to cymbals.

⁴² Goldberg 240

textures during his solo section, it was his last (as well as his first) recording with Ornette Coleman.

Ornette's improvisation on *Free Jazz* is nothing short of spectacular. While his playing isn't as explosive as on "Focus on Sanity" or "Eventually",⁴³ he continually finds short, melodic phrases that elevate the intensity of every player in the group without relying on any composed harmonic structures. Charlie Haden described the first time he heard Ornette play, which certainly sheds light on his improvisation in *Free Jazz*, by saying that suddenly, "the room lights up for me, from the heavens. You know, I say, 'What is this, it sounds like a human voice on an instrument, playing so freely.' He was playing in the intervals that he was playing, the whole tune in about three notes or four notes. He would play the musical feeling of everything."⁴⁴ Ornette's vocal qualities in his improvisation spoke clearly to Haden, just as they did to generations of jazz musicians.

Not unlike Freddie Hubbard, Ornette draws upon the bebop tradition and vocabulary to inform his improvisation. John Lewis said that Ornette "is, in a sense, an extension of Charlie Parker"⁴⁵ while A.B. Spellman added that while his playing was certainly "derived from Charlie Parker, [he] was a copy of no one."⁴⁶ Charlie Parker's effect on the world of jazz as well as his profound influence on an innumerable amount of musicians go well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to recognize how he specifically influenced Ornette in order to more thoroughly understand his music. This influence becomes undeniable between 10:18

⁴³ Two tracks from *The Shape of Jazz to Come*.

⁴⁴ Charlie Haden, PBS Interview, Ken Burns Jazz

⁴⁵ Spellman 80

⁴⁶ Spellman 79

and 10:45 as Ornette begins his solo section. Playing in a swing-eighth note style, he plays a wonderful improvised melody that, like some of Freddie Hubbard's phrases, horizontally outlines a Bb major tonality. Or, as Michael Cogswell describes the harmonic component of Coleman's music, "harmony is created only by the contrapuntal interaction of independent melodies or by the contour of the melodic line."⁴⁷ It's quite unusual for Ornette to improvise within a diatonic tonality for so long which makes me question why the other horn players in the band don't play a single note throughout this "Bb" section. It isn't until Coleman ventures farther and farther away from a specific tonality that we hear the rest of the horn section creep in with their musical thoughts. This starts at 10:51 with a simple phrase by Don Cherry and eventually explodes into a collective improvisation with all four horn players including a figure that could be considered a "background." This is played by Freddie Hubbard and Eric Dolphy starting at 10:56 and tapers off at approximately 11:18, leading into continued collective improvisation.

The idea of Ornette playing for such a long period of time in a consistent tonal center leads to many discussions, including the idea of context, specifically that the same musical phrases have the ability to evoke completely different meanings within different contexts. Ornette's improvisation in this section certainly falls into Schuller's "coherent" category, at least on its own. But would this seemingly "coherent" phraseology of Ornette still be considered "coherent" juxtaposed against what's going on behind him? While I find the initial idea of "musical coherence" based solely on simplified harmonic reductions to be completely illogical, it does help

⁴⁷ Cogswell, Michael Bruce.

us better understand the role of context and juxtaposition in collective improvisation and, more importantly, all of Ornette's music. In this case he is playing a melodic line, composed of several smaller phrases, which can be analyzed and reduced⁴⁸ using Western harmony and the diatonic system. Yet he is playing over no composed harmonic structures with two bassists playing lines that may briefly hint at some type of harmonic structure but overall have, in essence, no relation to any type of harmony, especially not a forty-second dance in Bb major. This gives Ornette's playing an entirely different meaning than if he played the same exact melody with a rhythm section that was playing a set of composed changes all diatonically based in Bb major. It's also carries a different meaning if Ornette played this melody completely solo, with a man throwing a bucket of marbles across the floor or in the middle of a construction site with the sounds of workers hammering, trucks driving by and project managers barking orders. Exactly what the meaning is differs based on personal observations of performers or listeners. When it comes to collective improvisation with no pre-determined harmonic structure, it's important for us, as listeners or scholars, to remove intention and meaning from any harmony found in the improvisation and base any intention of the improviser or meaning of the music solely in the sound and texture of the music and the feelings it evokes. This is one of the primary goals of collective improvisation, which is to provide ultimate freedom in creation. The removal of harmony (in the case of *Free Jazz*) releases the improviser from restrictive harmonic elements as well as freeing the listener to simply listen and enjoy.

⁴⁸ Schuller, *Musings*

Chapter 4: Jason Rigby

While I intend to draw as many parallels as possible between the music of Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby, these two men have incredibly different backgrounds. Jason Rigby was born in Japan and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. He often tells stories of trying to play along with Lester Young recordings before he understood anything about jazz. He didn't mind the clashing tonalities yet continually strived to be "a part of that sound."⁴⁹ His musical studies continued at Youngstown State University, DePaul University and the Manhattan School of Music after which he began a career as a freelance artist in NYC recording, teaching and playing a wide variety of gigs.

Influences

The idea of jazz players coming out of certain "schools" of playing (as opposed to a physical institution) is often discussed with new and old players alike. For example, Gunther Schuller asserts that Coleman Hawkins "founded a veritable dynasty of tenor saxophone players" including such greats as Ben Webster and Chu Berry, and to a lesser extent, John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins.⁵⁰ I asserted earlier that Ornette came out of the Charlie Parker school of saxophone. This doesn't mean that Ornette played only Parker tunes, constantly quoted Parker solos or even composed in the same style. It only refers to the basics of saxophone playing and improvisation. This encompasses such subcategories as tone, technique, improvisational devices, musical vocabulary, and improvisational density or ferocity. For example, Bobby Bradford, a jazz trumpeter who had heard Ornette play live very early in his career (in

⁴⁹ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

⁵⁰ Schuller, *The Swing Era*

this case about four years before his first record was released), notices that “Bird and Sonny [Rollins] would use the device of playing half a step above the key for one phrase, just to add that little taste of piquancy, but Ornette would go out and stay there...and this would test your capacity for dissonance.”⁵¹ This is an example of Ornette being influenced by specific improvisational techniques and using them as platforms from which he leapt to a new, different and original way of playing over standards and eventually an entirely new concept of improvisation regardless of compositional or harmonic material.

In the same way that Ornette Coleman comes from the Bird school of alto saxophone I believe that Jason Rigby comes from the Joe Henderson school of tenor saxophone. Of course Joe Henderson’s lineage could be traced back well before Ornette or even Bird, but for the sake of comparison Joe Henderson is perfect. The following is how Rigby described Henderson’s rhythmic abilities in his improvisation, and in doing so also revealed a great deal about his own playing.

Joe Henderson is a great example of somebody who has elements of looseness to what he does but is also deeply rooted in the tradition. One of the things about Joe Henderson’s playing that I really love is that he’s able to play such a hardcore, grooving thing and then he’s able to float over the time that’s happening with flurries of notes. To me, that was a rhythmic departure...after Bird, Coltrane and Ornette, I think that what Joe Henderson did was the most recent innovation.⁵²

Henderson is known for his warm and round sound (as compared to Wayne Shorter or John Coltrane), which he achieved by using an atypical mouthpiece (for jazz players) that had a very small tip opening. The resistance created by his

⁵¹ Richard Williams, “Memories of Ornette,” *Melody Maker*, July 17, 1971. Quoted in Litweiller.

⁵² Rigby, Jason. Personal Interview. 9 January 2009.

mouthpiece helped him find this sound and also provided a wonderful platform for experimenting with the endless aural possibilities of the tenor saxophone. He experiments with overtones in the beginning of the track “El Barrio”⁵³ as well as during his improvisation. Overblowing a resistant setup, as well as specific changes in the embouchure creates remarkable sounds and timbres unique to the tenor saxophone, a technique often used by Joe Henderson. Jason Rigby explores this technique to every possible end. Rigby plays a similar setup to Henderson, although uses a much harder reed and has a mouthpiece with a larger tip opening and higher baffle. This provides a similar amount of resistance (if not more) while creating a larger space to create sound within the mouthpiece. While Rigby achieves an incredibly warm and inviting tone, the power, presence, depth and intensity of his sound are undeniable. It serves as a perfect platform for experimenting with the boundless limits of the tenor saxophone, like Joe Henderson but to a different level. This idea will be explored in the discussion of the tune “Atmospheric.”

Rigby’s influences certainly aren’t limited to Joe Henderson. His first exposure to jazz came in the form of recordings of John Coltrane from the early sixties. But using Coltrane as an entryway into jazz was a bit difficult and he aided that transition by listening to more accessible bebop and hard-bop saxophone players like Charlie Parker, early Sonny Rollins and Dexter Gordon. After becoming more and more comfortable with the genre, as well as with music in general, Rigby became heavily interested in late Coltrane albums, Joe Lavano, the Paul Motian Trio, Wayne Shorter, Phillip Glass, Ornette Coleman, Mahler, Bartok, and Shostakovic while his

⁵³ Henderson, Joe. *Inner Urge*. Audio Recording 1964.

non-musical influences include Ernest Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright.⁵⁴ In allowing his influences to reach beyond the musical world Rigby is able to add new, sometimes non-musical dimensions to his music such as texture, color, dreams and physical space. All of his influences as well as his personal aspirations and visions are reflected not only in his improvisational prowess but his fine and emotive compositional talents, as well.

⁵⁴ Rigby. Interview and *Translucent Space* Press Release.

Chapter 5: Jason Rigby's *Translucent Space*

Translucent Space was Jason Rigby's first solo project. It was recorded and released in 2006 and features Mike Holober on piano and Rhodes⁵⁵, Cameron Brown on bass and Mark Ferber on drums. Other contributing instrumentalists include Russ Johnson on trumpet, Jason Gillenwater on clarinet, Soo-Kyung Park on flute, Lauren Riley on cello and Sam Sadigursky on clarinet. Rigby plays soprano, alto and tenor saxophone as well as bass clarinet and a long Indian flute. This flute, somewhat predictably, is featured on a tune called "Mumbai." *Translucent Space* features nine original compositions by Rigby in which he explores several textural concepts as well as touching on different aspects of freedom in his music, allowing true collective improvisations to extend and enhance the group's creativity.

Green of Greens

The song "Green of Greens" features Rigby on soprano saxophone, Holober on piano, Brown on bass and Ferber on drums. It's a fairly standard jazz quartet situation, an arrangement of jazz instrumentalists that had been used for almost seventy years before *Translucent Space* was recorded. These musicians reach deep into the history of music, art and self-expression and create a forcefully beautiful piece. Rigby explains the freedom of "Green of Greens" by saying it "has a form and it has a melody and harmony, very dictated harmony, but there's no steady tempo."⁵⁶ This gives each member of the band, whether soloing, accompanying or playing the melody, the freedom to spend "as much time on each harmonic area as [they]

⁵⁵ A Fender™ electric piano.

⁵⁶ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

wanted.”⁵⁷ While composed harmonies necessitate each improviser to stay within a certain harmonic structure, the soloist dictates when the band collectively moves to each new harmonic space. The lack of a steady tempo, instead of creating a sluggish, uninspired song with no forward motion, creates an incredible, wave-like, pulsing effect in the music that propels the song forward with more intensity than could ever be matched if played within a steady tempo. A rubato melody and ballad-like sensitivity throughout Rigby’s composition creates an instantaneous bond between the performers and the listeners that heightens the listener’s appreciation of the beautiful melody, haunting harmonies and delicate interplay between the soloists and accompanists. Perhaps “traveling [through] the lush forests and rocky meadows of southern Germany”⁵⁸, the inspiration for “Green of Greens,” enhances the overall vibe of this particular song, taking the listener up and down the hills of the greenest of green forests.

The improvisation on “Green of Greens” rarely pushes the boundaries of fascinating technical skill and doesn’t necessarily dazzle the listener with complex harmonic devices. They rely on working within the composed harmonic structures and feeding off of the group’s energy and collective direction to create poignant phrases that both rest within one harmonic area and gracefully glide over several. Sidney Finkelstein, in the midst of attempting to create improvisational laws, states that “commercial jazz is practically all rhythm-dominated” while “the outstanding figures in jazz history, those whose improvisations and intentions have been most treasured and have lasted longest, who have moved their hearer most deeply, played

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Translucent Space* Press Release.

in a speech-inflected style.”⁵⁹ He also contends that these “outstanding artists” are able to combine speech-inflected improvisation with rhythm-dominated phrases with an emphasis on the speech-inflected style. He lists some “commercial” artists or groups as Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Benny Goodman and his orchestra and Coleman Hawkins while artists who stray from this “commercial” phraseology and improvise with a speech-inflected style include Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Miles Davis and Charlie Mingus.⁶⁰ While I find his definitions and his distinctions between these great artists irrational, he does bring an important discussion to the table. The idea of speech-inflected style of improvisation is very important, especially when discussing improvisation within collective improvisation. Finkelstein relates speech-inflected improvisation to the “inner world of reflection, thought, meditation, anger, pathos [and] introspection.”⁶¹ Each artist and improviser in Rigby’s quartet, using their individual voice, is able to convey all of these things and more.

In removing steady tempo from “Green of Greens,” Rigby essentially made the entire piece a collective improvisation. Even during the melody, the accompanying musicians (bass, piano, drums) improvise following the melodic instruments cue on when to move from one harmony to the next. Ingrid Monson, in an interview with the bassist Cecil McBee, finds that McBee “suggests that the rhythmic flow is what frames and integrates the remaining musical elements...being harmony, melody and timbre.”⁶² In the case of “Green of Greens,” Mark Ferber takes the role of supplying endless rhythmic flow. Ferber, playing the drums, has the most

⁵⁹ Finkelstein. “Inner and Outer Jazz.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Monson. 28.

freedom of any member of the group, as he isn't tied to any harmonies. As the other three musicians sometimes settle into a specific harmony (either to allow space for a soloist or to follow the intensity curve of the tune and the energy of the group), Ferber is constantly creating circular and sweeping phrases that propel the rest of the group in transition between harmonic areas. He creates incredibly unique and innovative sounds on the drums, transforming and expanding the aural possibilities of the drum kit. Mike Holober also takes on an incredibly unique and distinct role throughout the piece, including his solo section. He plays sweeping chordal structures and long lines that use an incredibly large range of the instrument. His style of playing changes during the bass solo, the most defined change of texture in the piece, to providing single, minimally voiced chords as to allow Cameron Brown the aural space to improvise. When Brown isn't soloing, his improvised lines weave in and around the harmonic space provided by the composer while never intruding on the soloist's phrase construction. Rigby leads the group through the tune by "cuing with [his] horn downbeats, when the next chord [will] happen." When he isn't playing, each soloist (first Holober, then Brown) would cue each harmonic change.⁶³ Like walking through an art museum and taking time to appreciate each piece, the improvisers on "Green of Greens" explore each harmonic space at their own pace. The end result is a collective improvisation filled with deep personal expression and pensive, gentle musical conversation.

⁶³ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

Exploring the Rhythmic World

The tune “Southampton” is Rigby’s introduction into the world of ostinato-driven compositions. *Translucent Space* features two tunes that are loosely based on ostinatos (one of which is “Southampton”), while Rigby utilizes the device more frequently and sometimes more stringently for tunes on *The Sage*, his sophomore album as a bandleader. In the case of “Southampton,” the ostinato figure also takes on a melodic role as Rigby and Cameron Brown play it on bass clarinet and bass, respectively, to open and close the tune. The harmonies are simple and based on chromatic modal motion in the style of “So What” by Miles Davis. Similar harmonic structures are found in the tune “Backandforthedness,” which features a rubato melody and fast-paced, driving solo sections with a steady tempo. Rigby refers to these harmonic structures and tunes as containing “elements of free-bop, minimalism and modal thrashing.”⁶⁴

In “Southampton” we find a type of composition with a bass ostinato driving the tune and simple harmonic construction with open forms that allows for expansive rhythmic exploration in both melody and solo sections. This is evident in Ferber’s drum intro and solo. In this solo he takes a fairly simple eight-beat cycle and, with the use of Chinese gongs, bells, and other standard drums and cymbals, permutes five- and seven-beat patterns over it. This explodes the basic form and allows his lines, phrases and groove to travel across barlines seamlessly. Seemingly out of nowhere, the bass/bass clarinet ostinato appears and the group dives into the tune continuing the rhythmic intensity that originated in the drum solo. The concept of the duet

⁶⁴ *Translucent Space* Press Release.

ostinato serving as a melody extends to the song “Mumbai,” a brief and fast-paced tune highlighted by a two-note pattern played by the flute and bass. Like the songs from *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, the melody is played up front and then used as thematic material for the solo section. The open form on the solo section creates a collective improvisation scenario in which Brown (on bass) becomes a second percussion instrument, as opposed to the bass’s typical role. This is because he limits his playing to only the two notes from the ostinato, varying the rhythms and patterns he plays. It’s a very interesting and fun tune that allows each member of this particular trio to stretch out rhythmically.

Another example of rhythmic exploration on *Translucent Space* is the song “114.” This tune features Rigby on tenor, Russ Johnson on trumpet and Ferber on the drums. Unlike “Southampton” there is no steady tempo, yet unlike “Green of Greens” it’s a driving and intense piece that maintains a high energy level throughout. It opens with all three musicians playing a fast-paced melody highlighted by Rigby and Johnson playing unison lines and parallel lines at half-step intervals. The solo section, on the other hand, is entirely free. It has no composed harmony, form, time signature or tempo and the improvisers rely only on the “vibe” of the tune (derived from melodic sections and/or brief instructions given by the composer⁶⁵) and the musical conversation, in this case between three instrumentalists. But playing completely free of harmonic structure proposes a slight problem to musicians who play instruments

⁶⁵ Rigby. 9 January 2009. Jason mentioned in the interview that whatever directions he gave to his ensemble were brief and as open as possible allowing for the unexpected to happen. For example, his direction to the band for his song “Green of Greens” was “rubato.” Any other ideas or inspirations came from in-the-moment improvisations of all the band members.

that are built within a certain harmonic system. The saxophone and trumpet are both built in accordance with the twelve-tone, tempered diatonic system which, according to John Cage, inhibits a composer's and musician's ability to create "experimental music."⁶⁶ Rigby, on the other hand, sees the diatonic system on which his instrument is built as an "associative language" among musicians. Just as two people use words that carry meaning and that they both understand to express ideas in conversation, instrumentalists use this diatonic language to express their musical ideas.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Cage pp 9-11.

⁶⁷ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

Chapter 6: *The Sage* and My Music

Rigby's second album as a bandleader came with a simpler lineup of musicians yet expanded upon the ideas and concepts of his first album by leaps and bounds. *The Sage* was recorded in early 2008 and released in October of that year. It features Mike Hooper, exclusively on Rhodes, Cameron Brown on bass, Gerald Cleaver on drums and Russ Johnson on trumpet. Rigby plays primarily tenor and soprano saxophone while also playing a bit of flute. It's a remarkable album filled to the brim with pure collective improvisation and, in many ways, is a continuation of the musical concepts of Ornette Coleman.

The Sage

The album's title track is a rhythmically challenging piece with a heavy groove based entirely on a bass ostinato. Brown plays this line, which travels through several different time signatures, throughout the entirety of the piece, the only exception being during the opening drum solo and drum/trumpet duet. While the ostinato may briefly and vaguely "hint at some areas of harmony"⁶⁸ there is no harmonic structure written into the tune. The composed material consists only of the bass line and a melody. This song, along with others from *The Sage* such as "Magenta" and "Crux," are inherently related (compositionally) to many of the tunes on Ornette's *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. With driving, often up-tempo grooves and a strong de-emphasis of harmonic structure and diatonic relations, these compositions draw similarities to those of Coleman in that the emphasis is placed on melodic formations and collective improvisation. In his music, Rigby embraces the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

philosophies of Ornette while creating original, fresh-sounding compositions that serve as backdrops to collective improvisation.

Within the context of a tune with no written or implied harmony (in this case, “The Sage”) the role of Holober’s Rhodes becomes somewhat unclear. Seeing as it is a chordal instrument (an electric piano), it has the potential to create unique challenges to improvisers who are attempting to stray away from defining harmonic structure. In choosing the Rhodes, Rigby says that he wanted that particular instrument “for the sound” and “was thinking of [the Rhodes] more as another horn player or as a ‘sound contributor’ as opposed to [its] harmonic function.” Although at times Holober does play “chords or clusters of notes,” the Rhodes is used for its sonic function and “textural contributions.” Rigby also wanted a “dirty Rhodes sound to double the bass line” which isn’t only aesthetically pleasing but also proves to the audience that it’s a composed section of the tune in the midst of free, open improvisation with no harmonic structure.⁶⁹

Magenta

Jason’s composition “Magenta” uses concepts found in both *The Shape of Jazz to Come* and *Free Jazz* of Ornette Coleman. The melody is played by the entire group, “rhythmically rubato” but with a heavy sense of forward motion and direction. Rigby refers to the melody as the only structure of the tune, after which it becomes “a total free-for-all.”⁷⁰ His description of the performance of “Magenta” can be easily traced to the fact that this piece has no composed tempo, form, or chord changes. The

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

only composed section of the tune is the melody therefore allowing complete freedom in the solo sections.

Compositional and Performance Techniques of My Music

My recital, which took place on the 27th of March 2009, featured music that came out of the long-standing jazz tradition, music that has been played by countless superb artists over the past century. And each of these artists, whether or not I even know who they are, has at least indirectly influenced my music. Saxophonists such as Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Stan Getz, Charlie Parker, Wayne Shorter, Albert Ayler, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon, Cannonball Adderly, Sonny Stitt, Joe Henderson, Lou Donaldson, Donny McCaslin, Chris Potter, Joshua Redman, Hank Mobley, Seamus Blake, Bob Berg and Michael Brecker have all had an extreme impact on my playing and composing, and those are just jazz saxophone players. Other artists both outside and within the genre of jazz have had similar effects on my music and continue to do so. That being said, I find that Rigby's and Coleman's music were most influential during the time that I was composing for this recital. This understanding lead me to write this paper about them and to seek to discover what makes their music unique, what draws me to their compositions and improvisations, and what I wanted to convey with my own compositions and performances.

Two of Jason Rigby's songs, "The Sage" and "Magenta", utilize compositional techniques that have directly influenced my writing. "The Sage" was my first introduction to a tune that was entirely based on a repeated bass ostinato. The driving groove and tight rhythmic structures lead me to compose a tune called "Try Seven." The bass ostinato in this tune draws upon structures and rhythms from South

Indian Karnatak music while the relatively simple nature of the bass line and heavy backbeat drum groove is inspired by listening to and playing roots reggae and dub music. All of these influences come together in “Try Seven,” a tune that has a defined and immovable rhythmic structure as well as a fluid harmonic structure. There are no composed harmonies leaving the improvisers to choose their harmonic direction or to de-emphasize harmony in their comping or soloing. My tune “Interplay,” on the other hand, is inspired by the intensity and freedom of “Magenta.” Like “Magenta,” “Interplay” only features a composed melody without a pre-defined time signature, harmonic structure, or specific tempo. The improvisation is harmonically free and the fast tempo of solo section creates high energy and intensity in each solo section. Melodic fragments cue the end of each solo and the entire tune ends with a portion of the melody.

Compositional techniques and the compositions themselves act as a starting point and a guide in this type of improvisational music, with collective improvisation. A piece is defined in performance by the artists who use their improvisational skills and experience in music (whether it be jazz or any other genre) to give meaning and life to the composition. Bandleaders therefore often give specific directions or allow certain freedoms within their works to encourage creativity and enhance communication and conversation in the music. In my composition “August,” for example, each soloist has the choice of whether to solo with a steady tempo or with a rubato feel. This concept is inspired by the lush improvisation of Rigby’s “Green of Greens” and its rubato melody and solos. Another example of freedom in performance is open forms and vamps and the option to expand upon composed

harmonic structures. Both “Presumption” and “The Space Between” feature certain elements of open form and harmonic freedom. While both of these tunes have composed forms, harmonies and melodies, the performers are encouraged to expand upon harmonic structures (or ignore them completely) in the solo sections as well as to choose when and for how long they and the rest of the band play within certain sections of the form. Ornette Coleman often expressed similar directions to his fellow musicians during jam sessions, recording sessions or rehearsals.⁷¹

These same ideas can be applied to compositions that are written without intentions to be played with the concept of collective improvisation. For example, I played the jazz standard “Alone Together”⁷² on my recital in addition to my original compositions. “Alone Together” was originally written as a song for the musical *Flying Colors* that opened on Broadway on September 15th, 1932 and was most likely scored for a small orchestra, completely eliminating improvisational elements for the instrumentalists and limiting any improvisation by the singer to inflections or slight changes in the rhythmic approach to the melody. Jazz artists such as Chet Baker and Bill Evans eventually played and recorded this song while applying their own rhythmic and harmonic ideas. In the same manner, I approached this tune with a concept of collective improvisation. While it retained a steady tempo, I encouraged both the drummer and bass player (two musicians that normally have important roles in keeping time) to play sounds, textures and lines instead of strictly keeping time. This gave the entire tune (melody sections as well as solo sections) a distinct feeling

⁷¹ See page 11

⁷² Music by Arthur Schwartz, lyrics by Howard Dietz.

in which all the members of the group were improvising continuously while sometimes playing a supportive or accompanying role.

My approach to the song “Alone Together” is certainly not an original concept. In fact, a great deal of jazz language was born from the same idea. Jazz conceptualists in the early- and mid-twentieth century deconstructed the compositions of American musical theatre and reformatted them to act as vehicles for improvisation. These through-composed and arranged songs from Broadway were stripped to cyclical structures (often in AABA or “song” form) featuring a melody and a harmonic skeleton. Even the composed parts of the song were changed in performance. Players added inflections to melodies, substituted different harmonies and chords for the originals, and sometimes extended the form of a tune by using a vamp. The constant fluidity of compositional material is a fundamental part of jazz and improvised music and certainly extends to my compositions as well as those of Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby.

The idea of playing sounds, textures, lines and shapes was not only present in “Alone Together” but was at hand for the entire concert. The rubato style of “August” left space for the drummer to fill melodic space with sound while the bass player was free to improvise contrapuntal lines or simply emphasize the root of each chord. The improvisational sections of “Interplay” were without any restrictions of form or harmony. This, at one point, led the entire band to drop out behind the keyboard solo. While this had never happened in rehearsal, I had spoken with the band about the fact that they are free to simply stop playing at any point, even if it was for a bar or two. The layering and texturing of music added to the overall group

aesthetic and enhanced intensity and energy curves in the songs. Other examples of this type of layering occurred in “August” when the band made the transition from the saxophone solo, where the entire band was playing, to the bass solo, where it was stripped to a bass and piano duet.

While the bassist’s role in “Try Seven” was clearly dictated in the composition, the keyboard player and drummer had the ability to create direction and energy in the tune by changing the density or texture of their playing. The keyboard player takes on a unique role in this tune, as well as “Interplay.” Within the context of a tune with no composed harmonic structure, a chordal instrument’s role can be somewhat unclear when it comes to comping behind a soloist or the melody. I discussed this concept with Jason Rigby when discussing his tune “The Sage.”⁷³ Something we talked about is the idea of playing “shapes.”⁷⁴ In describing this idea, Rigby said that he would tell the piano player to avoid specific harmonies and, instead, just look up at the ceiling and drop their hands on the keyboard. This idea of creating a thick shape on the keyboard came into play during both “Try Seven” and “Interplay” and added an interesting dimension to these tunes. The only unfortunate part of my recital was the fact that we only played one night. Playing this music over a long period of time would be ideal to allow each tune to grow and change as each player injects more and more of their own personality into the music.

⁷³ See pgs. 36-37

⁷⁴ Rigby. 9 January 2009.

Conclusion

The essence of improvisation is at the heart of all music. Whether it is a romantic-era composer sitting at the piano improvising melodies for their next symphony, an R&B drummer creating fills between song sections or a Mridangam⁷⁵ player exploring the intricacies of tala, improvisation serves as an exploratory tool as well as an incredible means of expression in music. And while improvisation in music is spontaneous composition, the amount of study and practice it takes to truly understand and grasp this concept, in any musical style, is astounding. The idea of collective improvisation can also provide a group of musicians the chance to explore musical space and go on a musical journey together, with or without composed material.

This paper is mainly a discussion of two jazz artists that both embrace the concept of improvisation and, more specifically, collective improvisation in their compositions. I attempt to define “collective improvisation” in chapter one and contextualize it specifically within jazz. The rest of the paper is dedicated to analyzing examples of recorded work of these two artists. I also compare their work and show how their ideas and musical advancements have come to fruition in other artists’ work, including my own. While they may represent a small fraction of jazz artists or even musicians in general, they each bring innovation and unique contributions, as big or as small as they may be, to the world of music.

Ornette Coleman and Jason Rigby are two saxophonist-composers who both have heavily influenced my compositions, performance ideals and improvisational

⁷⁵ A two-headed drum used as rhythmic accompaniment in a Karnatak music ensemble.

techniques. They each are deeply rooted in the history and tradition of jazz music. They are intellectual individuals who are constantly searching for new ideas and new techniques to allow their music to grow. While they certainly are not the only two influences in my musical conceptions, they have had the most impact on my experiences in the realm of jazz and my latest compositions. In discussing their music and discovering what separates it from traditional forms of jazz, as well as how Rigby is inherently linked to Ornette, I have also discovered more about my own music and my intentions within my compositions. I hope to continue to build upon these intentions in the future in both composition and performance.

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