This Brings Us To What?
Attending to the music and life of Henry Threadgill in search of an individualized hermeneutics

by

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Abstract

There has been little academic engagement with the work of Henry Threadgill, one of the most important composers of the past century. Despite his unique compositional sensibility and steady commitment to his aesthetic, his work has not received the attention it deserves. In the past decade, Threadgill has moved from the periphery to center stage as part of a larger re-evaluation of canonicity across genres. In my investigation of Threadgill’s music, I argue for an individualized hermeneutics attending to both the contextual and formal ways of making meaning. I explore the story of Threadgill’s early years, and trace a lineage all his own through the ensembles he has worked with. I then examine in detail the interval based system that forms the underpinnings for all of the compositions for his current group – Zooid. The lens I propose has implications for the future of the analytical project, and is part of a greater trend to engage the artist on their own terms.
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Introduction: An Expansion of Beauty

Thierry de Duve, quoted by Jean-François Lyotard in his seminal essay *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, said “the modern aesthetic question is not ‘What is beautiful?’ but ‘What can be said to be art...’”¹ This particular way of making sense with 20th and 21st century art does do important work in bringing many of the avant-garde movements into the fold, however it by no means defines the aesthetics of modernity. The move he makes with this statement reassures the audience that they do not need to look for “beauty” in work they find hard to grasp. Rather than putting the onus on the public to work through their aesthetic bias, de Duve proposes a conceptual lens, redirecting the conversation to discuss process, thereby abstracting the question of taste away from emotional engagement with the work itself.

Composer and multi-instrumentalist Henry Threadgill is not interested in foregrounding process. For Threadgill, the question does remain ‘What is beautiful?’, the gauntlet he throws down is not about confronting our definitions of art, but rather daring us to find beauty in challenging work that looks as much towards an imagined future as it does to referents of the past. In an interview with critic Daniel Fischlin, Threadgill colorfully makes his point:

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Here’s the food. The food is good! Now here’s this other food and the person starts telling you what’s in the food and how they made it and all these other things and you say, well let me just taste the food, just let me see what it tastes like. So no one really cares how you do something, they only care about the end product. Nobody’s interested in whether you painted this painting with your toe, that you stepped on it, or how you wrote the book in a fit of delirium. Nobody really cares. All that matters is, “Is it happening?” Is it happening? Art is only about happening.²

The position that Threadgill takes poses an interesting challenge for the listener. As an experimentalist in the truest sense of the word, Threadgill is always attempting to create newness in his work. Growing up in mid-century Chicago, he was raised on boogie woogie and the blues, and to borrow A.B. Spellman’s colorful phrase, he “digested Europe” and took from that tradition what suited him.³ The product of these, and other raw materials, fused in the crucible of his creativity, is an aesthetic that is often dissonant and slippery. The musical surface he creates, and, until recently, the exclusion of his work from the official canons of any of the traditions he draws from, presents an interpretive challenge. If we take Threadgill at his word, that the meaning in his music is in the building, not the blueprint or bricks. How then, might a listener attend to his work when that building has elements of brutalist, art deco, gothic and futurist architecture all at once - and undergoes renovations every year? Threadgill’s music, especially

his most recent work, can be in turns pointillistic and chaotic, flowing and jarring. At first brush, each instrument seems to be pursuing its own objective, propelled by a chimeric groove and egged on by the other players as they too expound in soliloquy, and yet in the midst of these internal monologues, it becomes apparent that ideas are most often brought to fruition by other than who created them, and in fact the musicians are collectively embroiled in communicating a common goal.

The broader question is if we take up Threadgill’s challenge to do the work to expand our definition of beauty, where do we turn to contextualize a music that lacks clear antecedents – partly because it has elements of so many different musics, and partly because his current work is the endpoint of a long and extremely individual journey?

Perhaps Peter Bürger can provide some assistance here. In the discussion of hermeneutics that he presents in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger writes: “the work of art as the object of possible cognition is not merely given to us tel quel. To identify a text as a poem we must fall back on a knowledge we already possess and that is handed down by tradition”. Bürger argues that we make meaning with art by placing it in dialogue with idiomatic signposts supplied by our history and experience.

The real challenge in interpreting the music of Henry Threadgill, and more specifically his current band Zooid, is that the compositions both provide a

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surplus, and yet simultaneously can feel devoid, of those signposts.

Confrontation with this oversaturation/scarcity causes dissonance - where can we turn for our sense-making? How can one interact with music engaged in hybridity without superimposing an established hermeneutics on it?

One possibility is to understand Threadgill’s music through the lens of the avant-garde – part of a post-modern backlash against established forms. Bürger discusses the avant-garde as a critique of the institution of art, separated as it was from the political and sacral institutions where it began. Bürger writes:

The evolution of art as a distinct subsystem that began with l’art pour l’art and was carried to its conclusion in Aestheticism must be seen in connection with the tendency toward the division of labor underway in bourgeois society. The fully evolved, distinct subsystem ‘art’ is simultaneously one whose individual products tend to no longer take on any social function.5

The role of the avant-garde, to Bürger, is “the self-criticism of the social subsystem of art” and occupies an inherently reactionary position.6

Henry Threadgill does not fit into this theorization of the avant-gardist critique. I argue that Threadgill’s work is best understood as an idiom on its own because his aesthetic is primarily one of synthesis and is therefore not concerned with reconstruction or deconstruction of a system of art he is not beholden to.

6 Ibid., 33
Bürger’s understanding of art as an institution separate from the praxis of the worker’s struggle does not map neatly on to the history of Black music in America. Bürger focuses on the visual and literary arts, and does not consider relevant any history of art other than the European lineage. In *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka discusses the way the blues evolved as a functional tradition for identity construction, having more in common with early European sacral music before the “loss of aura” that Bürger ascribes to the liberation of Art from the Catholic Church in Renaissance Europe. Baraka also makes it very clear, and George Lewis makes a similar point that we will discuss later, that the separation of life and art is not endemic to the African-American musical tradition. Baraka tells us:

> All [African-American musical movements prior to Baraka’s writing] . . . show definite instances of reference that . . . isolate each group from the others as a social entity. No slave song need speak about the slave’s lack of money; no early Afro-American slave song would make reference to the Christian Church; almost no classical blues song would or could, make direct or positive mention of Africa. Each phase of the Negro’s music issued directly from the dictates of his social and psychological environment.  

Although Threadgill’s music is morphologically quite different from than the early blues forms discussed by Baraka, Threadgill’s roots are in that tradition, a tradition in which art and life have not been separated in the same way that they have in European culture. The institution of Art as separate from life is not nearly as formalized in the blues tradition and there cannot, as a result, be a comparable movement of self-criticism regarding

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the division and specialization of labor. Therefore, Threadgill’s work cannot be said to be avant-garde in the same way. It follows that I will refrain from calling Threadgill’s work avant-garde, after the manner in which he discusses his own aesthetic. By avoiding the interpretation of Threadgill’s work as the reactionary historical critique suggested by the category of avant-garde, we return to the dilemma of situating his music in a tradition.

In this study, I will argue that the best way to interpret with Henry Threadgill’s music is through an intersectional historicized lens. Working with one eye to the story of Threadgill’s life and the other to the systems of composition that he created, results in a study that is analogous to situating his work in a tradition of his own making. To that end, I will attempt to illuminate interpretative signposts for making meaning with Threadgill’s oeuvre.
Canon Forming, Race, and The Problem of “Jazz”

I first came to Threadgill’s music while perusing the National Public Radio’s online list of Best Jazz Albums of 2015. His album *In for a Penny, in for a Pound*, which would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize, was ranked in the top ten for the year. As I intend to explore in this chapter, the inclusion of Threadgill’s current music in the “jazz” category presents serious historical implications given the way the category has been used in the systematic erasure of the work of Black experimental composers. When searching for idiomatic referents for Threadgill’s work, it is important to grapple with the history of exclusion of Black experimental composers by both the New York School of experimental music and the jazz canonization project of the 1980’s. The cold shoulder that Threadgill and other practitioners of Creative Music received from the repertory movement stands counter to the self-definition of this music by its creators, in which they draw a clear line from the blues and early Black American art forms to their own work. The situation is further complicated by the racially motivated exclusion of these composers from the category of Experimental Music, as well as the pervasive refusal of cultural institutions to recognize Black composers as creators of “serious” or “art” musics.

According to a piece published by radio station WBGO, the term jazz appeared for the first time in the Los Angeles Times in 1912 in an article about baseball. The paper quotes pitcher Ben Henderson as saying

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'I got a new curve this year . . . and I'm goin' to pitch one or two of them tomorrow. I call it the Jazz ball because it wobbles and you simply can't do anything with it.’ [That is, it's too lively for them to hit it.] As prize fighters who invent new punches are always the first to get their’s Ben will probably be lucky if some guy don’t hit that new Jazzer ball a mile today. It is to be hoped that some unintelligent compositor does not spell that the Jag ball. That's what it must be at that if it wobbles. [That is, he jokes, don’t confuse this with a drunken ‘jag’].

The term’s application to music did not start in New Orleans, but rather Chicago, and most importantly, did not start with African-Americans. As legendary drummer Max Roach put it,

Let us first eliminate the term, “jazz.” It is not a term or a name that we as black musicians, ever gave to the art which we created. It is a name that was given to the Afro-American's art form by white America, with and which therefore inherits all the racist and prurient attitudes which have been directed to all other aspects of the black experience in this country.

Considering the extent of the baggage the term “jazz” brings to the table, and its inaccuracy with regard to the music in question, I will not use it in this study other than to unpack the problems pushed to the fore by including the music of Zooid in the category.

I would like to define a few terms that I will be using throughout this study. *Eurological* and *Afrological* are both words coined by composer, trombonist and scholar George Lewis and used by other thinkers in writing and talking about different culturally constructed approaches to music.

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making. They do not assume the race of the performer, but rather the cultural history that informs their work. In his seminal article “Improvised Music After 1950”, Lewis says his construction of "Afrological" and "Eurological" systems of improvisative musicality refers to social and cultural location and is theorized here as historically emergent rather than ethnically essential, thereby accounting for the reality of transcultural and transracial communication among improvisers. For example, African-American music, like any music, can be performed by a person of any "race" without losing its character as historically Afrological, just as a performance of Karnatic vocal music by Terry Riley does not transform the raga into a Eurological music form.11

Lewis theorizes these two traditions of improvisation through the contributions of watershed figures in each idiom. For the Afrological legacy of improvisation, he chooses Charlie Parker, while for the Eurological side, he chooses John Cage.

An Afrological approach to improvisation draws on the legacy of the music known as jazz, and specifically, the subset of that music known as bebop. While the aesthetics of the various musics that owe debt to, and are placed within, the tradition of Afrological improvisation, vary widely, Lewis gestures towards some characteristics that he deems essential to Afrological music. Lewis quotes Amiri Baraka, who wrote in his seminal text Blues People, “that bebop ‘had more than an accidental implication of social upheaval associated with it’”. Lewis furthers this point when he says “New

improvisative and compositional styles are often identified with ideals of race advancement and, more importantly, as resistive ripostes to perceived opposition to black social expression and economic advancement by the dominant white American culture”.  

Returning to my critique of Bürger, an Afrological conception of improvisation does not engage in Aestheticism, nor does it view Art as an institution separate from life, thereby precluding it from Bürger’s definition of avant-garde. However, the Afrological musical movements that are “identified . . . as resistive ripostes” could be said to be avant-garde in a more radical definition of the term. The refusal to separate art from life is in itself a radical action that presents an implicit critique to the Eurocentric hegemony.

Afrological music is enmeshed in the fabric of the socio-political moment within which it is created. Henry Threadgill has, on more than one occasion, expressed his belief in an art as historically emergent. His temporally located idea of musical expression is a major point of divergence between his philosophy and that of the repertory movement.

Lewis defines Afrological music in as an improvised music containing “sonic symbolism [that] is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality as well as form”. Of note, there is no discussion of what musical features an Afrological work contains in his piece, as there is of the

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12 Ibid., 94
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
content of a Eurological work. I postulate that this is the result the history of institutional exclusion of Afrological music. Black American composers and performers did not have access to power in canon-forming mechanisms such as universities and non-profit organizations until relatively recently, and without these platforms, there is, by comparison, little theoretical work for Lewis to draw from.

In his definition of Eurological music, Lewis is able to draw on theory about composition, which due to the hegemonic status of European music, has been theorized for centuries in institutions of learning and arts patronage. Lewis uses the definition of a composition put forward by Carl Dahlhaus, a prominent German musicologist of the twentieth century. Dahlhaus proposes that

a composition is, first, an individually complete structure in itself . . .
Second, this structure must be fully worked-out . . . Third and fourth, it is fixed in written form . . . in order to be performed . . . Finally, what is worked out and notated must constitute the essential part of the aesthetic object that is constituted in the consciousness of the listener.\(^\text{15}\)

This definition was the dominant one for much of the first half of the twentieth century, and it is tempting to show how Henry Threadgill was working against that definition. However, as I discussed earlier, an examination of Threadgill’s work as a critique of this hegemony would be a mischaracterization. Threadgill was not restricted to engaging in restructuring the Eurological model. My intent in calling on Lewis’

\(^{15}\) Ibid. 96
distinction between Afrological and Eurological forms is to show that Threadgill’s music was not participating in the tradition of European music, and came out of a lineage of experimentalism that was inherently its own model. Threadgill’s work is not separate from the social reality experienced by its creator.

Dahlhaus’s definition obviously precludes the possibility of improvisation in any form and is upended by John Cage and the New York School that coalesced around him. Cage developed the ideas of aleatory practice and indeterminacy as ways of ensuring unpredictable outcomes for his pieces. Lewis quotes Cage’s definition of experimental music: “an experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen”, a definition that bears a great deal of similarity to Steve Lacy’s remarks to Derek Baily about improvisation: “you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown”. We will shortly return to the discrepancy between the Dahlhaus definition of a work and Cage’s in light of the advancement of improvisation by Black musicians in the first half of the twentieth century.

The third term I would like to define is Creative Music. I will use this term to describe the current practices of a subset of musicians working in the Afrological tradition who fall outside of the scope of the music known as jazz, and who resist the relegation of Afrological music to the category of

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entertainment. Creative music engages with the Afrological tradition of improvisation and composition to create an art music still enmeshed in the praxis of life. I will include in this term the music called the “New Thing” or the “New Music” or “Free Jazz” at its inception in the late 1950’s.

Creative Music is the term used by many artists who work in the liminal spaces between genres to describe their own work, and it meshes nicely with writer Valerie Wilmer’s discussion of artistry. Wilmer relates that the position of Jerome Cooper, a drummer who worked within this idiom, is that an “artist [is] someone who creates”.17 The distinction being made here is the difference between an artist and an entertainer. Wilmer writes “The new players deliberately strove to exclude any familiar phrases from their improvisations. To them, something familiar could be construed as ‘entertainment’ and they didn’t want that”.18 The pushback against the category of entertainment was due to the working conditions and available venues that accompanied that designation.

Calling Henry Threadgill’s music “jazz” is made even more complicated by the fact that absent the term itself, the category, as it has been defined by critics and institutions, has not always been large enough or willing to accept Threadgill’s slippery aesthetic. Threadgill’s music, like the music of other Black experimentalists in the United States in the second half

17 Valerie Wilmer, As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1980). 26
18Ibid.
of the 20th century, has long been excluded from the process of cannon forming.

When the New Music began with Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, critics were unable, and unwilling, to see it as a continuation of the experimentation begun by Duke Ellington and furthered by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. The harmony in the “New Thing” was dissonant, the forms amorphous, and the timbres unfamiliar. When Coleman created music without metric regularity or regard to standard twelve bar forms, many critics and established musicians spoke about his inability to play the blues. In a DownBeat blindfold test, Miles Davis railed against Coleman’s music. When critic Leaonard Feather played him “The Funeral” by Archie Shepp, Davis said:

You’re putting me on with that! . . . I know who it is - Ornette, fucking up the trumpet and the alto. I don't understand that jive at all. The guy has nice rhythm on saxophone. People are so gullible - they go for that - they go for something they don't know about.

Feather: Why do you think they go for it?

Davis: Because they feel it’s not hip not to go for it. But if something sounds terrible, man, a person should have enough respect for his own mind to say it doesn't sound good. It doesn't to me, and I’m not going to listen to it. No matter how long you listen to it, it doesn't sound any good.

Anyone can tell that guy’s not a trumpet player - it's just notes that come out, and every note he plays, he looks serious about it, and people will go for it - especially white people. They go for anything. They want to be hipper than any other race, and they go for anything ridiculous like that.
Feather: Actually, you got that one wrong - it wasn’t Ornette. It was an Archie Shepp date with John Tchicai on alto and Don Cherry on trumpet.

Davis: Well, whoever it is, it sounds the same - Ornette sounds the same way. That’s where Archie and them got that shit from; there sure ain’t nothing there.¹⁹

However, If you were to talk to trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith about it, as Wilmer did, he might tell you that he “never considered the blues to be twelve-bars, [he] never considered the blues to be a closed form. The blues is exactly, in [his] understanding of it, a free music”.²⁰

The vast majority of white mainstream critics did not share Smith’s perspective, however. The New Music was attacked viciously on two fronts. On one side, jazz critics did not see the connection to the blues that Smith, and the other musicians who were engaging in the new experiment, did. Conversely, the other group that might have been likely to accept the movement – the musicians and critics around what came to be called “Experimental Music” had a different problem. Wilmer writes of it, “the so-called New Music has been treated irresponsibly by many critics, something that could not . . . have gone on for so long has the music in question been created by whites”.²¹

Wilmer goes on to detail the example of Anthony Braxton. Braxton – a virtuosic performer and magnificent composer – had trouble getting his genre defying compositions performed in the Euro-centric ecosystem of

²⁰ Wilmer, As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz. 9
²¹ Ibid. 10
concert music circles because his race automatically designated his music “jazz”, and thereby entertainment. Wilmer quotes trumpeter Lester Bowie who said, “Look at Anthony Braxton . . . Because he is a ‘Black jazz musician’, he has difficulty in having his compositions played. If he was called ‘Leonard Bernstein’, he would not have such a problem. But he does ‘jazz’ and it’s not serious music”.22

To return to Lewis’ piece, it is evident that there are very real financial and cultural resources at stake in the argument over what constitutes serious music. Lewis quotes sociologist Howard Becker when he writes:

If I can argue cogently that jazz merits as serious consideration on aesthetic grounds as other forms of art music, then I can compete, as a jazz player, for grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and faculty positions in music schools, perform in the same halls as symphony orchestras, and require the same attention to the nuances of my work as the most serious classical composer.23

Lewis argues that this financial stake in maintaining the white, Eurocentric, hegemony was one of the reasons the New Music was treated unfairly for as long as it was. In the same article, Lewis quotes activist and pioneer of critical race theory Kimberlé Crenshaw, using her idea of an “‘actual stake in racism’” developed by “the previously Balkanized European ethnics . . . through the legal and social privileges that attend their classification as

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22 Ibid. 11
23 Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." 101
‘white’". Lewis is arguing that the construction of whiteness out of the ethnic division between European immigrant groups was in response to the financial gains available to them through maintenance of a raced hegemony. This manifests in many areas of cultural production, but one of the most relevant to our study is the perceived need by composers working in the European tradition to distance the reintroduction of spontaneous music making into Eurological musics from advancement by, or influence from, the music known as jazz.

There was significant professional benefit accrued by Eurological artists by keeping Creative Musicians working in the Afrological tradition confined to entertainment. John Cage, for example, notoriously expressed his dislike of the music known as jazz to critic Michael Zerwin, an interview that we will visit in more depth shortly. Furthermore, Cage made very sure to relegate jazz to “entertainment” rather than “serious” music. One might wonder why the man responsible for bringing improvisation back to a tradition that had stifled spontaneous expression for at least one hundred and fifty years would not be interested in a dialogue with the other major improvisational language in the region of the world in which he lived.

The answer can perhaps be found in the words of Anthony Braxton. Braxton, quoted in Lewis’s piece, said: “Both aleatory and indeterminism

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24 Ibid., 100
are words which have been coined ... to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility".26

Cage’s distaste towards jazz need not have been anything more than a personal dislike, had he not used his considerable platform to deride the genre. In an interview with Michael Zerwin of the Village Voice in 1966, Cage and Zerwin discuss Cage’s problems with jazz, which range from “suggest[ing] too frequently that people are talking”; including “tension” rather than pursuing “tranquility”; and “the reiterated beat” that “clobbers” the listener.27 Two noteworthy pieces of the discussion include Zerwin’s argument to Cage that jazz is “young” and “beginning to get at [contemporary Eurological practices]”28 – part of their larger unspoken definition of the term “serious music” as not including jazz; and Cage’s disgust with the regular time exhibited in jazz, but his enjoyment of it when utilized in (white dominated) Rock & Roll.29

Threadgill and other pioneers of Black experimental music were not only denied access to the resources allocated to their colleagues working in the Eurological tradition, but were also were not, at first, beneficiaries of inclusion in the jazz repertory movement of the 1980s and 90s, when jazz did win some respect and institutional power.

In the late 80’s the arts titan Lincoln Center Inc. decided to branch out to include a series of “Classical Jazz” concerts, spearheaded by the

27 Zerwin, ”A Lethal Measurement.” 162-5
28 Ibid. 163
29 Ibid. 166
virtuosic jazz conservationist, Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis had made a name for himself as a world class trumpeter and composer after being featured in Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, and used that platform to champion a conservative outlook on the nature of jazz. The founding of Jazz At Lincoln Center (JALC) was a meteoric event on the landscape of improvised music. At its conception in 1991, musician and critic Peter Watrous wrote for the New York Times:

'It is hard to overestimate its [JALC's] importance in the next few years. Even nationally, the brute force of a million-dollar first-year budget and a string of 18 concerts, all emanating from an American institution dedicated to the preservation of classical music, has to act as a legitimizing influence.\(^30\)

As Watrous points out, the establishment of a program the size of JALC went a long way towards giving jazz musicians their due as serious artists. Not only did the program elevate jazz conceptually, but with the opening of the Rose Theater in 2004, jazz musicians had access to a hall equal to that of any orchestra. This benefit is complicated, however, by the narrow definition of jazz presented by Marsalis and his colleagues, Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch. As the first, and largest, program of its kind, JALC was in the unique position to define the parameters of what Afrological music is called jazz, and is therefore qualifies for support. As Watrous puts it:

[JALC’s leadership] disdains experimentalism in favor of an evolution based on tradition. They represent only one strain of a polyphonic discussion, but with a few exceptions the new program takes their perspective as the whole truth. This in effect makes Lincoln Center a partisan in an ideological argument, and it should not be when its program is the only one of its kind in the country.  

Marsalis and JALC put heavy emphasis on “the blues tradition”, while restricting the scope of that tradition to Afrological art music up through the 1960’s. Practitioners of Creative Music would argue that they are as much, if not more so, connected to the blues tradition than someone playing in a repertory group. JALC has moved towards a slightly looser definition of jazz in recent years, including celebrations of some of the pioneers of the creative music such as Ornette Coleman. As critic Francis Davis wrote in 2004,

Ornette Coleman was overdue for a tribute, but when his turn finally arrived . . . there could have been a banner above Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra reading, “This is not our music.” The arrangements of Coleman classics from the early 1960s, most of them by Marsalis or saxophonist Ted Nash, tethered harmolodics to a metronome and a tuning fork.  

JALC may feature the music of an elder such as Coleman, but it is clear that their broader stance has not changed. In a piece on the 30th anniversary of the organization, Giovanni Russonello wrote for the New York Times “At a time when canon-busting is nearly the national

31 Ibid., 23
32 Francis Davis, ”Mr. Uptown And Mr. Downtown,” The Village Voice (24 Feb. 2004).
consensus, Jazz at Lincoln Center’s founding artistic director, Wynton Marsalis, maintains that jazz is a classical music with a fixed roster of heroes, and a nonnegotiable rhythmic foundation”. Although Henry Threadgill was engaged to premiere two new works there in 2017, it was as a part of a series to honor the three Pulitzer winners in jazz, of which Marsalis was the first. The concerts came about only after Threadgill’s win and widespread critical recognition in the 2000’s, and when he had to cancel due to illness, they were not rescheduled.

The direction taken by JALC was both the product of a greater cultural moment and a force responsible for extending that period – the repertory movement of the 1980’s – for the next fifteen years. In the early years of the new millennium, the jazz world was still dominated by JALC’s perspective. As Pi Recordings President Seth Rosner told me, “In . . . ’99 - 2000, Sony/Columbia [released] a Wynton Marsalis album once a month”. Change, however, was on the horizon. George Lewis’s thorough documentation of the AACM was a signal flare on the border of a new cultural landscape, and a new generation of virtuosic composer/improvisors working in the interstices of tradition and experimentation were trumpeting the AACM as a part of their history. As Rosner said,

[Lewis’ book] frames a lot of things, that brings a lot of attention. And you know [the AACM are] . . . not there publicly [at that time], . . . they’ve got

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34 Seth Rosner, President of Pi Recordings, in conversation with the author.
shows every year in New York, but it’s not as public a thing because you
don’t yet have the Vijay Iyers, the Jason Morans, the Tyshawn Soreys . . .
[people like] Steve Lehman, you don’t yet have these people saying these
guys are a huge part of my influence. What you’ve got is T.S. Monk making
dedication albums to his dad.\(^{36}\)

I will not point to Lewis’ book alone as the sole catalyst for the cultural
shift, but there was an unquestionable change in public opinion in the mid
naughts, leading up to Threadgill’s Pulitzer win. Rosner called it the effect
of “water on a stone”, saying that the AACM had been uncompromisingly
focused on their creative pursuits for so long people had to start giving their
work the serious consideration it deserves. Rosner posits that the financial
crash in 2008 caused the “world . . . to step back and question a lot of the
principles that it had been running on”.\(^{37}\)

Musicologist Edward Komara provides some useful language with
which to discuss this new acceptance of multiplicity. In his article “Culture
Wars, Canonicity, and ‘A Basic Music Library’, Komara compiles a list of ten
different kinds of canons as they relate to music. I include the most relevant
to our study below

1) Potential: the entire written corpus, with all the surviving oral literature
(= every book on music, every score, sound recording, and every unwritten
exercised performance tradition)
(2) Accessible: that portion of the potential canon available at time (= every
item in libraries--especially those listed WorldCat--and available through
retail outlets, including websites)

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\(^{36}\) Seth Rosner, President of Pi Recordings, in conversation with the author.
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
(3) Official: "standard" lists promoted and "institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism" (= "standard repertory" of classical music, the Rolling Stone Record Guide for rock music). For the most part, Official Canon is the type assumed when use of the word "canon" is unqualified.

(4) Personal: what individual readers subjectively "know and value" (= Amazon.com "listmania" purchaser-picks lists, staff recommendations in library and bookstore newsletters and Web sites).

(5) Critical: works repeatedly treated in critical articles or books (= in music studies, texts by Schenker and Adorno; in classical music, writings about Mahler Symphonies nos. 2, 3, and 6, in contrast to the seldom studied Bruckner Symphonies nos. 2, 3, and 6; in jazz studies, more frequent mentions of Louis Armstrong's 1928 recording of "West End Blues" . . .

(7) Closed: an authoritative body of texts such as the Bible (= no clear example for music, but the nearest to it may be medieval and Renaissance scholarly music theory texts and the musical works cited in them).

. . .

(9) Diachronic: the timeless core canon such as that studied in college Great Books curricula (= scores reprinted by Dover Publications, the recordings presented in the New World Records LP series The Recorded Anthology of American Music). 38

Around the turn of the century, there was a larger movement across many creative fields to expand the Official and Diachronic Canons to include artists and thinkers not previously recognized. Coming out of the Reagan Era, the general social trend was towards a view of the contemporary

Official Canon as Closed, rather than historically emergent. Komara writes that he does not see a clear musical corollary to the idea of a Closed Canon as found in literature, but I would argue that the trend towards repertory and conservation amongst the Young Lions and other jazz circles at the end of the 20th century was precisely a movement to create a Closed Canon. Perhaps as a backlash against that movement, or perhaps as a part of a broader re-examining of the official narratives of many disciplines, the trend in the early part of the new millennium was much the opposite.

Komara presents Carl Dahlhaus’ theorization of the relationship between canon forming and history in the same paper. Dahlhaus argues ‘historiography and the canon it has inherited [exist in a] dialectical relation’. Dalhaus presents the historian with three ways of engagement with an existent canon. Of the three, the second aim is of most concern to our study. Dalhaus argues that a historical project can work “to draw attention to the categories, criteria and modes of thought (such as the idea and history of classicism) which, implicitly or explicitly, underlie the surviving aesthetic canon”. I have attempted to do just that in the first part of this investigation in order to unpack the complicated relationship between experimentalism and race.

Threadgill is very passionate that music cannot be separated from the cultural moment of its creation. In an interview with pianist Ethan Iverson,

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39 Komara, “Culture Wars, Canonicity, and “A Basic Music Library”.” 238-239
40 Ibid.
Threadgill said “art has an emotional, social, psychological and spiritual content that’s tied to you being born in history at that time”.41 As we continue in our investigation of his work, I am going to lean heavily on this premise in the hopes of showing that a historical approach to analysis is a meaningful way of interpreting Threadgill’s music.

41 Henry Threadgill, "Interview with Henry Threadgill " interview by Ethan Iverson, Do The M@th.
Reactants: Chicago and the War

There is a long standing debate within the study of music, a push and pull between two methods of knowledge production. One approach is embodied by the archetypal music theorist, the other, the ur-ethnographer. In my encounters with this methodological divide between the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology, the theorist deals with the music as an object, a meeting place for cultural production and reproduction, while to the ethnographer, the idea of the piece as an object, the “autonomy of the musical work” is anathema. Ethnomusicologists study music as a product of culture and create meaning from the lives of the people who make it. This debate is laid out by Kofi Agawu in his book on African music and its study. Agawu writes of the most extreme positions, Ethnomusicologists take account of the context of a composition; music theorists ignore it. Ethnomusicologists reject the idea of an autonomous musical object; music theorists embrace it. Analysis, when practiced by ethnomusicologists, uses ad hoc, contextually appropriate methods; music theorists strive for systematic methods.

Agawu is careful to point out that “these oppositions present half-truths at best” due to their dichotomous nature. One need look no further than the illustrious faculty of Wesleyan University and similar institutions to find examples of scholars in both fields treating the line between their

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
methodologies as porous membrane rather than unbridgeable gulf.

However, there are many scholars who do labor under these oppositions, and for that reason I think it is important to spend time addressing the split.

Agawu makes the compelling claim that both sides of this debate would stand to gain enormous insight if they were to integrate each other’s methods into their work. In his discussion, he quotes musicologist David Temperley’s position:

All that is required from ethnomusicologists is the concession that intensive and "autonomous" study of musical objects, represented by scores or in some other way, can be a valuable route to the understanding of music of any kind; and the concession by theorists that this is not the only route to such understanding, and hardly ever a sufficient one….\(^{45}\)

Agawu is not optimistic about the prospects of this reconciliation of method, saying that both sides are “deeply entrenched”.\(^{46}\) However, I believe that when it comes to the music of Henry Threadgill, it is not only possible, it is imperative that any discussion of his work begin from both a contextual and analytical loci. The intersectional lens proposed by Agawu combines ethnography with formal analysis, but his underlying framework need not be confined to ethnographers. In the case of Threadgill, it is the context of history, rather than ethnography that provides the most insight.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 321.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 322.
This lens is necessary, even though it causes a break with established formal analysis practices, because I am not only advocating for the incorporation of context into the interpretation of a still autonomous musical work. Rather, I will employ an individualized hermeneutics that gives equal weight to the life of the artist, and views the development of Threadgill’s aesthetic in dialogue with his own body of work.

In an interview I conducted in November 2018, drummer Pheeoran akLaff told me “[Threadgill is] probably one of the people that I think most lives his experience on the sleeve of his manuscript paper”. Threadgill’s music is rooted in the lived experience of a Black man growing up in Chicago in the middle of the 20th century, and Threadgill himself has been very vocal about music representing the time and space it was composed in. He has also been clear about the musicians who influenced him as a young composer, of earlier generations and his own. The story of influence and origin that I will tell in the following pages, does not contain or adequately describe the music, nor does it adequately give Threadgill credit for his innovations in composition. This chapter will discuss the time and space, the experience that shapes Threadgill’s music, as one half of the picture, reserving the technical half for the following chapter.

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47 Pheeoran akLaff, (drummer for Henry Threadgill for much of the 1980’s and 90’s) in discussion with the author, November 2018
Henry Threadgill was born in Bronzeville, Chicago in 1944. The child of divorced parents, he grew up living with his mother, her siblings and their parents. In an interview with George Lewis, Threadgill says that his father “ran gambling houses”. Threadgill remembers being taken to the clubs at a young age, with music as “the babysitter”. He said his father would “give us money to put in the jukebox”, which mainly played jazz due to the fact that his “father loved jazz, and he knew all those people, Basie and all of them. He would go to Mexico and Spain with them on vacation and stuff”.

While he was being exposed to jazz through visiting his father’s clubs, as well as listening to records with him, Threadgill was hearing many other types of music at home. In the Fischlin interview from 2011, Threadgill talks about being exposed to music from Eastern Europe.

Chicago . . . had two of the largest European communities with the Polish community back in the railway yards . . . and there was also the Serbian community. That Eastern-Europe music was quite different and I grew up listening to all of this Serbian music [and] Polish music.

He further detailed that his mother would take him to concerts regularly and was a trained pianist herself. Contributing to the variety of music he was exposed to, Threadgill’s aunt went to college to study opera,

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50 Fischlin, “'A Door to Other Doors': Henry Threadgill Interview with Daniel Fischlin,” 3-4.
and at one point, he was living with an aunt in Rockford, Illinois who was married to one of Ahmad Jamaal’s bass players.\textsuperscript{51}

The two most important influences that Threadgill discusses, however, were his mother’s piano and the radio. In the same interview with Fischlin, Threadgill says that he was first drawn to the piano as a child after hearing boogie-woogie music on the radio. He started learning that style by ear at age three, but his appetite for music did not stop there, even at a young age. Threadgill recalls, “Where kids sit in front of the television now, we would sit in front of the radio and just go from station to station”.\textsuperscript{52}

When Threadgill was a little older, he was inspired by the music of Charlie Parker to cajole his parents into getting him a tenor saxophone.\textsuperscript{53} Lewis relates that Threadgill could frequently be found at the various clubs on 63\textsuperscript{rd} Street from as early an age as 14. As a young man, Threadgill was going to jam sessions – though at his own admission he “wasn’t doing nothing major” – as well as playing in “polka bands, Dixieland ensembles, and rehearsal big bands”. Around the same time, Threadgill was starting at Wilson Junior College where he met both Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman – both key founding members of the AACM. Threadgill recalls another important influence of the time being the University of Chicago’s concert series, where he was able to meet both Paul Hindemith and Edgar Varese.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 4
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Lewis, \textit{A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music}, 74.
While he was at Wilson Junior College, Threadgill was a part of a club for music enthusiasts. The club brought musicians to perform at the school and talk to the group, and in 1963, one of the musicians who spoke and played at Wilson College was Muhal Richard Abrams. Threadgill remembered: “he invited me down to the Experimental Band. The Experimental Band is what preceded the AACM. That’s where all those musicians were, these musical heads (Muhal Richard Abrams, Fred Anderson, Steve McCall, and Donald Myrick) were gathered in the Experimental Band and trying out different music they were writing out”.55

In an interview at the Library of Congress with Larry Appelbaum, Threadgill cites another important figure in the Chicago music scene at the time. He said that there were three kind of leaderships going on in [Chicago at the time]. Sun Ra had been the first one, and then Muhal and Phil [Cohran] who had been together but then split. They [each] had a different . . . philosophical/musical camp, but they all went back to Sun Ra in a way.56

The Experimental Band was the precursor to the AACM, focusing on the same underlying principle of providing a resource for composers to test out their ideas. Threadgill was not there to see the Experimental Band transition into the AACM, however, as he left Chicago shortly after.

In 1965, Threadgill started playing alto saxophone for church services, and caught the ear of Horace Shepherd, a traveling evangelist.

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55 Fischlin, "‘A Door to Other Doors’: Henry Threadgill Interview with Daniel Fischlin," 4.
Shepherd asked Threadgill to come join his troop. Touring the country, Threadgill recalled “playing in camp meetings, speaking in tongues, pulling snakes out of people’s mouths”. The ultra-theatrical revival show put on by Shepherd proved to be a valuable set of experiences to draw on for Threadgill. He describes the structure of the sermons as carefully timed to build layers of energy with Shepherd coming out to preach when the musicians had reached their peak.

Pheeoran akLaff told me “[Threadgill] brings to his music this depth of experience from being a war veteran. That cannot be discounted in the emotional content of some of his works”. In 1966, faced with the threat of being drafted into combat in Vietnam, Threadgill opted to join the United States Army Band. In Iverson’s conversation with him, Threadgill says:

That was where we went too, to learn music . . . if there wasn’t a war going on, you’d go and join a band. Those were some of the greatest bands in the country! All you had to do was play music and practice all day . . . you got a salary, meals, room and board and two years to practice your stuff subsidized . . . it was like going to college – don’t bother me I’m practicing for two years!

George Lewis relates that Threadgill was expecting the army to be a space “where you could go and practice, and get paid. That’s why cats went in

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58 See Lewis, p. 76 for a description of one of Shepherd’s services.
59 Pheeoran akLaff (, in discussion with the author, November 2018
60 Threadgill, interview.
there, like Trane, Wayne Shorter, Clark Terry”.61 Threadgill was at first stationed in Kansas, working as an arranger. In the same interview at with Appelbaum, Threadgill relates the story of how he went from the first arranger in the army to active duty in Vietnam.

They had given me a commission to write a medley of [patriotic songs], and I wrote it, and I guess it must have come across like Stravinsky or something to these people. . . I never knew what it was really for, [it turns out] it was for some big inauguration in Kansas City. The cardinal, the governor, the mayor, the head of the 5th Army . . . were all on this podium [as] this piece was being premiered, and the cardinal was going to speak . . . They weren’t up in this piece more than eight or ten bars and the cardinal jumped up and screamed ‘blasphemy’. . . the next day [he had to go] back in the second clarinet section [as arranger he had been able to write instead of playing in the band]. . . We came back after lunch for the afternoon rehearsal. . . and this guy comes in the door in [dress] uniform carrying a dispatch case. . . the guy starts reading ‘according to so and so and so and so and so blah blah blah leedle able able able blah blah private Threadgill’ I said ‘what did you say?!’ . . . ‘has been assigned to the Fourth Infantry Division Pleiku’ I said ‘Pleiku, where’s that? . . . he has thirty days to get his life in order and report to Oakland, California and then on to Pleiku, the Fourth Infantry Division.62

As a member of the band, Threadgill was not made to serve as part of an infantry company, yet in his discussion with Ethan Iverson, he makes it very clear that over there, that did not matter.

62 Threadgill, interview.
I was in the . . . Fourth Infantry Band . . . Slow this down, Fourth. Infantry. Band. What word comes before band? . . . I was in the Fourth Infantry Surgical Division, what word comes first? Infantry. I was in the Fourth Infantry Cook Division. Infantry. Everything – shoemaker, brain surgeon, cook, secretary, piano player, communications person – if it said infantry, that’s what you are.63

The experience of fighting in Vietnam profoundly changed Threadgill’s outlook. He told Iverson “you have no idea how long it takes . . . to put that all behind you”.64

When Threadgill was honorably discharged in 1971, the AACM was already in full swing. Shortly after his arrival back in the states, The Art Ensemble, along with Anthony Braxton and his group, went to Paris in search of a better work environment. Threadgill did not go, as he told Appelbaum, because he “needed to get a sense of what was going on and get [himself] together in Chicago, get [his] music going. By the time [he] got everything going, the Paris days were ending, everyone was coming back”.65

In his interview with Ethan Iverson, Threadgill talks about his movement towards Creative Music. He said

I was a Sonny Rollins fanatic when I came in here, 15 years old. But, all of a sudden, the whole picture changed when Ornette and Cecil appeared. I always knew I wasn’t going to play that other music, because I couldn’t play that music in the first place. Nobody could play that music but the people that lived it. Music comes out of a social context. And young musicians right

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63 Iverson, *Do The M@th*
64 Ibid.
65 Threadgill, interview.
now don’t understand that. All you can do is practice something that’s not from your time. You’re not able to do it. Art has an emotional, social, psychological and spiritual content that’s tied to you being born in history at that time . . . You’ve got to find something else. You can only play that music you learned, but you’ll never be able to compete with Oscar Peterson or Bill Evans or anyone else who played that music. I discovered that when I was young, you know? I learned that I never can do that, not the way they did it. I don’t care how much you learn about it. You won’t be able to do it because it’s tied to a life. Music is everything that you’ve learned in a life; it’s your family, your friends, your experiences, your hardships, your good days, your bad days – it’s tied into all of that. All of that comes into play when you express something. The integrity of it becomes a real reality when it becomes a part of your time. Accept that what you are expressing is a product of your time. You can’t bring to the product of another period the necessary investment in terms of the emotion and the psychology and the experience to lift it up to that level. Only the people from that time can do that.66

Threadgill has brought all of the formative experiences I relate in this section to his expressive and extremely personal aesthetic throughout his career.

66 Iverson, Do The M@th
Products: A Threadgillian Aesthetic

Threadgill has engaged with the cultural milieu of his early years both directly and implicitly. In 1979, his early group Air recorded their take on songs by Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton. These interpretations were far from traditionalist, and show Threadgill’s ability to call up the legacy of rhythm and blues music without being limited to expression in the language of a time in which he did not live. As Wesleyan Professor and longtime Threadgill collaborator Jay Hoggard told me, “the blues was a given, [Threadgill] grew up on it”. Air Lore shows that connection while also serving as a good example of the way the AACM members defined their unique voices. The music of Zooid is the most abstract to date, but by putting it in the context of Threadgill’s oeuvre, it becomes easier to understand. Engaging with his music at the vertical cross section of its location in space and time, as we did in the previous section, is one important discussion, yet just as important is the horizontal story of his personal musical development.

Moving into the specifics of Zooid, there are a number of choices that Threadgill made that both challenge the listener and yet remain consistent through many of his works of the past forty years. One of the first things I noticed about the ensemble is the unusual stewardship of the low-end. When he first formed Zooid, Threadgill was writing for tuba (José Davila),

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67 *Air Lore* (1979), Arista Novus
68 Jay Hoggard, in conversation with the author, April 2019.
cello (Dana Leong), and no bass player. A few years later, Threadgill
replaced the cello with bass guitar (Stomu Takeishi) for This Brings Us To,
Volume I and Volume II, as well as the 2012 album Tomorrow Sunny / The
Revelry, Spp. In 2015, Threadgill went back to cello and tuba for In for a
Penny, In for a Pound, this time with Christopher Hoffman filling the cello
chair. These unusual configurations have two touchstones in the history of
Threadgill’s bands: X-75 and the Very Very Circus.

The surplus of low-end instruments is prefigured in X-75, an album
for “four reeds, voice and four basses” also released in 1979.\(^{69}\) His first
album as a band leader, X-75 was a step in a new direction and showcased
Threadgill’s compositional skills. In the words of Rafi Zabor, writing for
Musician Player and Listener, “despite the album’s numerical moniker this
is expressive, even Romantic music. . . it’s an ensemble album, and no
single instrument rises to dominate it”.\(^{70}\) The music of Zooid, despite the
considerable aesthetic distance Threadgill has travelled since his first outing
as band leader, shares many qualities with this first record, qualities that I
would argue are the essence of his music.

Zooid, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means
An organism or (esp. in early use) motile cell thought to resemble an animal
but not to be one in a strict or full sense; esp. an invertebrate animal
generated by budding, division, or other means of asexual
reproduction; spec. any of the individuals which make up a colonial animal

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\(^{69}\) X-75 Volume 1 (1979), Arista Novus
(bryozoan, cnidarian, etc.) and which often have specialized forms and functions.71

The final part of this definition has the most relevance to Threadgillian aesthetics. A “colonial animal” or a creature who is made up of separate living organisms that function together to produce a whole, is the perfect metaphor for the way Threadgill’s ensembles function. In Zooid, as in X-75, there is never a moment where there is one member of the group who is the only focus of attention. There are standout melodies and even soloist/accompaniment dynamics at times, but the accompaniment is restless and slippery, providing an overall sound in which “no single instrument rises to dominate” the texture. In an interview with New Music Box, Threadgill says:

A lot of times when I’m setting up to play with Zooid, the guy puts the microphones up on the stage and then he turns my mic up louder than everybody else. I said, see, this is that type of thinking: that they’re supposed to be accompanying me or something. A lot of times, I don’t play on pieces. It’s not necessary. It’s boring in the first place. If we have four people that come to the table, and every time you’ve got to talk, what are they sitting there for? Every time, you know. Every other time, maybe number two will get a chance to say something. Three or four, you may never hear from them. So why are they there in the first place? 72

72 Henry Threadgill, ”Henry Threadgill: No Compromise,” ed. Frank J. Oteri (NewMusicBox: New Music USA, October 1 2010), Web.
Zooid, like many of his ensembles, is polyp-like in its interaction, with Threadgill often featuring the other members of the band more than himself.

Threadgill’s ensemble conception is central to his aesthetic. In his discussion with Iverson, Threadgill says “it’s a team effort. People forget that, and sometimes they’ll just look at the leader’s name on the date. The musicians realize the blueprint. Their ability to open up your blueprint is what brings a work to life”. This is supported by guitar player for Zooid Liberty Ellman’s description of being a member of the band. He told me “There’s a certain malleability to the composition that is unusual. . . Some people might be open to changing things, but it comes across more as being undecided, where Henry is actually involving you in the process, which is different than being undecided”. In Threadgill’s words “form itself is in a state of improvisation . . . the music is totally modular because what is here can be here or what is here can be there because this is what we discover in [rehearsal]”. The emphasis on discovery, and working alongside band-members to produce the form of a piece is part of what gives each Threadgill ensemble such a unique sound.

Zabor has one more kernel of relevant insight. He writes of X-75: “the rhythmic underpinnings are propulsive and various”, two adjectives that could serve to describe much of Threadgill’s output.

73 Iverson, Do The M@th.
74 Liberty Ellman, in conversation with the author December 2018
75 Iverson, Do The M@th
76 “Jazz Briefs,” 61.
told me that one of the most important things to know about Threadgill is that “he composes for the American drumset, and [akLaff] can count on one hand the amount of people who have done that in [his] 40 year career”.77 A perfect example of Threadgill’s extraordinary style of composition for drumset can be found in the song “The Devil Is On The Loose And Dancin’ With A Monkey” from the Sextett album *Rag, Bush and All*. The Sextett was unusual to begin with, having, in this case, both Newman Baker and Reggie Nicholson on drumset and mostly through-composed drum parts. What made it even more unique, as Threadgill told Iverson, was that “both sets were tuned so that chromatically [he] could get the entire scale”.78 In the outro of “The Devil Is On The Loose And Dancin’ With A Monkey”, the drummers play the main theme of the piece on their tuned drum kits. Although Threadgill did not bring this particular innovation to the more metrically ambiguous style of Zooid, there is still a compelling, often syncopated, rhythmic conception underlying the music.

Stylistic precedents to Zooid can also be found in the makeup of Threadgill’s ensemble Very Very Circus. The ensemble consisted of “two guitars, two tubas, trombone, drums and [Threadgill on] alto saxophone”. Jon Pareles writes of the group for the New York Times: “[Threadgill] has created an ensemble sound that seems to glide without gravity yet continually moves forward as he constantly recombines instruments in roles

77 Pheeoran akLaff, in discussion with the author, November 2018
78 Iverson, *Do The M@th*
that are never fixed”. Antecedents to Zooid are not only evident in the use of tuba in lieu of bass, but also in this endless recombination of textures.

Threadgill’s Pulitzer winning album *In for a Penny, In for a Pound* features, in his words, concertos for each instrument, showcasing fascinating textural combinations. The aesthetics found in these ensembles: complex yet expressive composition, non-hierarchical roles, multiple and unconventional low-end instrumentation and a very strong rhythmic conception, are all carried forwards into his writing for Zooid.

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The Zooid System

The fascinating thing about Threadgill’s evolution is that, while it is rewarding to follow common aesthetic qualities through his work, a large portion of his pallet changes with every new ensemble he works with. The compositional system that he has arrived at with Zooid is by far one of the most original and advanced that he has worked with to date. For the second half of this investigation, I am going to attempt to unravel the specifics of this system, not in order to limit the interpretation of his music to the composition process, but rather as another avenue of approach to understanding his work – one concerned specifically with the musical surface he creates.

In the course of my analysis, I am going to use tools developed mainly for the study of concert music in the Eurological tradition. I think it is important to point out that while there is a precedent of analysis of Afrological composition and improvisation (Steven Block’s investigation of the music of Cecil Taylor comes to mind), performing formal analysis with these tools solidifies links between Threadgill’s music and a tradition of music that, although his work contains aspects of it, does not contain him.

The lineage that Threadgill belongs has been excluded from the narratives of most traditions. At its founding, the AACM was not concerned with anything but creating sonic manifestations in their individual voices.

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Shunned both by the conservationist movement in the later Twentieth Century as well as by the mostly white tradition of Experimental Music, the legacy of the AACM has been one of self-determination in the face of exclusion. Contemporary formal analysis is relevant, and necessary to a degree, as Threadgill’s current system has gone beyond the limits of what traditional tonal analysis can express, but the use of these techniques as a descriptive aide in engaging with Threadgill’s music should not be misconstrued as placing him within the lineage of traditions that discriminated against him and his peers.

There is an unfortunate body of work, including the article I referenced earlier by Block, dedicated to the work of Ornette Coleman and other pioneers of free music that searches for Eurological harmonic devices in a music that has no interest in them, perhaps in a clumsy attempt to legitimize their work by fitting it into the canon of European art music. The result, however, is an erasure of their innovations and a perpetuation of the hierarchy between the superordinate system of European music and the lineage of Black American music. Rather than cheapen Threadgill’s accomplishments by mis-attributing their inspiration to the hegemonic tradition that was so often used to invalidate his work, using tools such as set class analysis and Klumpenhouwer Networks invites a discussion of Creative Music that puts it in dialogue with European art music as an equal contributor rather than as a changeling offshoot.
I suggest we return to Agawu to think through this. Agawu’s discussion is of African music in a post-colonial world, but his statements are helpful in thinking about any transfer of technique across institutional power gradients. He writes, “To say that the term [for conductor] emerged in response to a foreign performing practice is to use the matter of origins to deny the Ewe an opportunity to participate in a wider conversation”\(^\text{81}\). If we refrain from using Eurocentric analytical practices to understand non-European music, it both supports the position that “European and African knowledge exist in separate, radically different spheres” – a position that Agawu points out is rooted in “racist and racialist sentiments” – and prevents any meaningful investigation of the compositional practice of composers outside of the Eurological lineage.\(^\text{82}\)

After many years of exploring ways to stretch tonal music to and past its breaking point, Threadgill has departed entirely from using that world as a foundation. Excluding their debut,\(^\text{83}\) all of the music he wrote for Zooid, has been built on an interval-based system. In an interview with Hank Shteamer of *The Wire*, Threadgill says, “the best reference [for the origins of the new system] is *Everybodys Mouth's a Book*\(^\text{84}\) [the final album by Make A Move, an earlier Threadgill ensemble], 'cause there's a few pieces on


\(^{82}\) Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*.

\(^{83}\) *Up Popped the Two Lips* (2001), Pi Recordings (written before his new system was in play)

\(^{84}\) Pi Recordings, 2001
there that's in the new language”. Threadgill is often fairly oblique when
he discusses the specifics of the system with interviewers, perhaps because
he does not want to draw attention away from the music itself. The most
detailed answer I was able to find is from the aforementioned interview
with Hank Shteamer:

Well, the language, the compositional language, the musical language, the
harmonic, contrapuntal, melodic language is such that we move from one
series of intervals to another series of intervals throughout a piece of music.
So let’s say the first series has five intervals in it, the next has seven
intervals in it, the next has three, the next has such and such like that, on
and on like that. And those intervals are what control everything at that
time. They control the voice leading and everything: The harmony, the
voice leading, the melodic line, everything is moving not necessarily with
every one of those intervals being used, but that pool of intervals, and
improvisation is coming from there also.

While this is certainly a good place to start, his description does not
go into great detail. Fortunately, I was able to speak to Liberty Ellman, the
guitar player in Zooid since its inception, and he gave me a detailed
explanation.

[Threadgill] might pick one chord that he likes in particular and that chord
has a certain relationship between the notes. . . [he then generates a set
class by looking at] different inversions of this chord and so different
chords will have different interval sets, and then once you have an interval
set . . . you can take the interval set from a chord and start generating other
chords that have the same interval set. Ellman is referring to set classes here.
as a key or mode or something, and you can start to improvise in that mode.  

Liberty’s description of the internal logic that links the disparate harmonic areas hints at an elegantly constructed system. If, as Ellman suggests, the ensemble moves as a unit between chords generated through manipulation of unordered pitch-class sets, it is worthwhile to try and understand those voice leading relationships.

One way to represent the way that different instruments move between spaces is by using Klumpenhouwer Networks (K-Nets). K-Nets are useful in this situation because they are able to illustrate voice leading relationships between verticalities that are tricky to name, let alone relate to each other. I am foregrounding voice leading relationships in my analysis because to a significant extent, the music of Zooid engages with traditional relationships between melody, harmony and improvisation, but does so outside of any system but Threadgill’s own. I believe that K-nets are the most interesting way of analyzing this music because, in a system where interval motion is the metastructure that replaces the traditional diatonic one, K-Nets show the close relationships between temporally disparate

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88 Liberty Ellman (guitarist for Henry Threadgill’s Zooid since its inception in 2001), in discussion with the author, December 2018. Liberty mentioned that Threadgill would not call it a mode, so for this investigation I am going to refer to the pitch class set used for generating chords and improvisation as the seed.
instances of motion, creating signposts of form much as chordal motion might in a diatonic piece.89

I’ve chosen “Polymorph” from This Brings Us To, Volume II for the clarity of the opening section. The opening is mid-tempo, the voices are often laying out the clusters in canon, and the form, at least initially, is unambiguous.

My goal in this analysis is to show how meaning can be made with the music of Zooid using tools of post-tonal theory. I have been in close contact with Ellman, and he was kind enough to send me a scan of the guitar part to “Polymorph”. I have attempted to extrapolate the rest of the ensemble’s parts for the opening section from the recording, and will start with an analysis of the first four measures.

When I spoke with Ellman, he told me that Threadgill usually uses trichords in his harmony, often notated as two notes over a third. In the

89 I have chosen to use K-nets in my analysis of “Polymorph” with the understanding that there is disagreement within academia about whether they can be tools for significant meaning making. For a detailed description of the perils, and some of the benefits of using K-nets, see the points made by Michael Buchler. In light of his insightful piece; I have taken care to ensure that my K-nets accurately represent the musical surface of the work I am discussing.
excerpt below, I have given the prime form of some of the trichords created by the bottom three voices.

\[(013) \quad (012) \quad (013) \quad (025) \quad (014)\]

Figure 1: mm. 1-4 of Polymorph with vertical structures highlighted

The verticalities I highlight are reflective of the way that Threadgill divides up each measure in his notation, shown below.

Figure 2: The first system of “Polymorph”, courtesy of Liberty Ellman

This analysis does not tell the most compelling story however. The relationship between the notes within the trichord is not as compelling as the relationships I have been able to draw between the harmonic regions. I have created K-Nets from Threadgill’s trichords, making sure to keep the bass voice and the two harmony notes in the same positions throughout my
networks. I chose to deal with the harmonic accompaniment in my analysis rather than a four node K-Net with the melody note included because, as Ellman told me, Threadgill tends to manipulate the time and phrasing of his written part to an extent that makes it difficult to accurately render the rhythmic content of his playing, and therefore to ascertain which harmonic zone his line belongs to. The three node networks below are more than adequate, however, to show the way that Threadgill voice leads through these clusters. Within the first two bars, every trichord has a positively isographic relationship with the previous and following chords, with their inversional constants differing by a major seventh across the board. Furthermore, the downbeat of the first and second measures are also positively isographic, differing by a constant of a major third.

Figure 3: three node K-Nets describing the first four harmonic areas
Additionally, it is noteworthy that the networks rotate consistently in a counterclockwise direction. As we will explore shortly, each trichord includes a polyvalent set of intervals, and this counterclockwise rotation shows that the transformation into and out of each harmonic area emphasizes a different aspect of those intervals.

In this excerpt of Threadgill’s handwritten manuscript, his unique system is represented by three idiosyncrasies of notation. Each measure contains a trichord featuring a dyad above a root. Beneath each trichord, Threadgill has written the number of beats the chord lasts in “normal time” followed by the number of beats it lasts in “long time”. Long time refers to an expansion of the harmonic motion where each chord is held for twice as long as written. The most interesting part of the system shown here is the interval notation for improvisation. Each parenthetical set of integers details a different set of intervals available to improvisors when that section is repeated during solos. Threadgill’s system, unlike that of Forte and his school of thought, does not go from 1-12, but rather uses the conventional descriptors of minor and augmented to modify the integers of the major scale, represented as 2-7. Ellman related to me that in the case when a set contains the same number twice, it corresponds to both the modified and natural interval being present.
Figure 4: Guitar Part for "Polymorph". Courtesy of Liberty Ellman
Ellman shed further light on Threadgill’s compositional system by discussing how the intervals found in each measure are generated. He told me “Henry’s interval method generates a set of chords. You won’t see all of the chords present in the bar, so you will see numbers that might not be represented, but they would be if you saw all of the chords”. Ellman describes the process of creating the full set of chords from which the intervals are derived to be somewhat analogues to creating inversions of triads in a tonal language. Each seed trichord has three interval classes – in the first example these are a minor second, a minor third and a major third. Each trichord has six other variations in its family within the Zooid system, related by these interval classes.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
A & C & F# & A & A & C# & F# \\
F# & A & D# & G & F & A & E# \\
F & F & F & F# & E & F# & C#
\end{array}
\]

134 347 123 145 347 13t 147

123457t
(223345-7)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
D & B & F & D & D & C & F \\
F & D & G# & F# & E & D & E \\
E & E & E & F & D# & F & F#
\end{array}
\]

19t 79t 149 189 1te 79t 1te

14789t
(-2356677)

*Figure 5: chord-family generation using the Zooid system. Non-bracketed numbers indicate interval classes in the Forte system, each interval set is then put into Threadgill’s notation in parentheses.*

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90 Personal communication with the author, March, 2019
In the figure above, I show how the sets found in measures three and five are derived. The first two iterations deal with the interval between the middle and top note – a minor third – while the bottom note remains static. In the first variation, the middle note is taken out and the top note moved down. In order to maintain the relationship between the middle and top note, a new pitch class (p.c.) is added a minor third above the middle (formerly top) note.

The second variation is derived in the same way, except in this case it is the top note that is taken out and the middle p.c. moved into its place. The D# is then added to maintain the interval of a minor third between the middle and top note that is the focus of these first two variations. The second two are focused on the relationship between the bottom and middle p.c., maintaining the interval of a minor second between them while the top note remains an A.

In variation three, the bottom note is removed and the middle note is moved into its place, with a G added in the middle position to keep expressing the minor second. The following trichord is created by removing the middle p.c., moving the F into its position and adding an E in the lowest position to complete the requirement for a minor second. The final two trichords deal with the interval between the bottom and top p.c.s, in this case a major third. In the fifth variation, the top two pitch classes are moved down together, and a major third is added above the middle pitch class. In the final iteration, the bottom two are moved up and a C# is added.
below to include the major third – this time between the bottom p.c. and the middle.\textsuperscript{91}

This same process is repeated for every measure to create the interval sets used in the improvisational parts of the piece. Ellman related to me that the interval structures are used to create color and texture around the notes in the trichords themselves that remain the focus of improvisation. The trichords are not fixed to what is written on the page however. In his discussion with Ethan Iverson, Threadgill says “You hear this harmony, but we aren’t really playing it, and we aren’t improvising on it. One piece of harmony can have as many as 14 faces”. He goes on to elaborate, saying: “C Major and C minor are the same thing. One is feminine and one is masculine, the mother creates so many children, and the father makes so many children. Between the two of them, I can get as many as 14 children”.\textsuperscript{92} This enigmatic metaphor does not quite fit in to the inversional relationships outlined above, but it is no coincidence that in my diagrams, I have derived seven inversions of each trichord. Threadgill seems to be saying that each trichord is one half of a duality, and that any inversion of either side of that duality can be substituted for the written trichord.

One aspect of Threadgill’s music that complicates analysis is the mutable formal aspect. Ellman told me “I think what makes it hard to pick up stuff off the records, or even in the performances, isn’t just that the

\textsuperscript{91} The F is respelled as an E\# here to more clearly show the relationship of a major third between the C\# and E\#.

\textsuperscript{92}
music . . . has a level of abstraction . . . it has more to do with the fact that the forms are very complicated".\textsuperscript{93} Not only are the forms complicated, Ellman told me, but they are also subject to manipulation and change from performance to performance. Ellman detailed this to me in the same interview, he said:

Henry might write a piece that has A, B, C and D, but while we’re rehearsing it he might say “Oh you know what, I really like the way D sounds, so let’s repeat the D section 4 times before we start playing the melody at A. And he might say play . . . the written part without the melody at letter D, or he might say somebody improvise at letter D and then we’ll go to A and play the melody. So a piece might start you’ll hear somebody soloing on a portion of the piece that’s actually the back half.\textsuperscript{94}

This, along with the constantly changing time signatures and dissonant harmony makes discussing form, even with a copy of the guitar part to serve as a road map, rather challenging. Ellman gave a detailed description of the form on the recording of “Polymorph” found on \textit{This Brings Us To, Vol. II}:

We play the head on the first 3 systems with a couple of repeated bars on system 3. Then tuba and alto solo over the first 3 systems in "long meter", . . . Then the bass solos over the last 2 systems in "regular meter". . . . The tuba and guitar start playing the written material under the bass solo, finally the sax comes in and we play the head over that last section all together, although the bass is pretty much soloing till the end.\textsuperscript{95}

More analysis should be done on the improvised sections of this ten-minute work to see how the interval sets relate to the improvised material. Ellman related that in the improvisation, “The chord tones are the

\textsuperscript{93} Liberty Ellman, in personal communication with the author, December 2018
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., March, 2019
dominating colors, and the intervals help shape the lines”. What Ellman is referring to is the level of abstraction that the ensemble has reached in relation to the system. Just as in contemporary jazz practices it is the norm to play a mixture of notes featured in the harmony and notes that transgress that, in the Zooid system improvisors work at the crossroads of the notes featured in the trichords and their inversions and the notes related to the harmony by the network of intervals.

Further study could include transcription of improvised sections to show this, and to discover how years of playing as a unit in this system has developed a way of relating to each other musically in improvised space that is developed out of Threadgill’s compositional voice. The use of K-Nets could also be expanded to the entire piece to understand the way voice leading and macrostructure interact. Threadgill’s discussion of duality as it relates to families of chords also poses a mystery worth unraveling. The purpose of showing the above relationships was to make clear a method through which the music of Zooid could be explored in the tradition of formal analysis.

96 Ibid.
Conclusion

The two ways that we have explored Threadgill’s music in this investigation give us different contexts through which to hear his work, and I believe a historical approach to formal analysis does important work in creating a history of his music. Returning to Bürger, we might look at his critique of theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer to understand more deeply why both of these approaches are important. Bürger writes about Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics as well as some of the responses to it: “for the conservative Gadamer, understanding ultimately comes to mean submission to the authority of tradition”. Gadamer argues that “the interest in tradition is motivated in a special way by the present and its interests”. Bürger’s critique is that it “implies that the present is something uniform whose interests can be defined and this is absolutely false. Up to this moment in history, the interests of the rulers and those of the ruled have hardly ever been the same”. The fundamental cut here is the difference between Gadamer’s “[equation of] understanding and the ‘placing of oneself within a process of tradition’” and that put forward by Bürger – “[insisting] that ‘he who investigates history is the same that makes history’”.98

In our investigation of Threadgill’s music, it is important to remember the erasure of the Black experimental composers from narratives of music history. This music was continuously passed over by both the jazz

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97 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, 5-6.
98 Ibid.
canonizing project of the 1980’s and excluded from the largely white narrative of the field of Experimental Music. In choosing to include a formal analysis of Threadgill’s music using contemporary post-tonal theory – tools developed for use in a tradition that has long excluded Afrological musics – I hope to, rather than limit Threadgill’s aesthetic, shift the scope of post-tonal theory away from a Eurological focus.

Returning to Komara’s discussion of canons, broadening the scope of formal analysis would lead to an opening of the Pedagogical Canon he mentions, as the vast majority of higher education in music theory is devoted to European innovations. This would have to be accompanied by a shift in the pedagogical focus however. Threadgill would be quick to point out that there would be no point in studying his work in an attempt to emulate him. In his interview with Iverson he said,

Man, it’s just wonderful what the New School and Berklee can teach people about technique, but they’re still misleading them into giving up all their time into thinking that you’re going to play something that Coltrane played or that Lester Young or Wayne Shorter or somebody played – music that was particular to a particular time.99

Threadgill’s innovations deserve to be recognized in an institutional setting, but more than his compositional devices, the next generation of musicians could learn much from his fearless devotion to his muse. Ellman told me,

99 Iverson, *Do The M@th*
[Threadgill is] a good example for sticking to your guns if you’re a creative person. Just following it even if everyone tells you it’s not working, if you really believe in it then you just keep going. The more work you do, the more success you’re going to have – in terms of the work, you can’t guarantee success commercially or any other way, but in terms of creating the best work that you know how to create – that comes from sincerity and conviction and he demonstrates that very well.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Ellman, in conversation with the author, December 2018
It is equally important to tell the story of Threadgill’s life, and to understand his music as historically situated, as that is where his expression has always come from. Threadgill has never been interested in an aesthetic derived solely from one tradition. In conversation with Larry Appelbaum, Appelbaum asks him if his aesthetic is “Eastern or Western” to which Threadgill replies: “Neither . . . you’re the sum of everything that you are . . . if it’s all Western, then maybe the summation is a Western summation . . . but I spent time in the islands, I spent time in India. . . Venezuela”.101 So how do we find beauty in this music? We listen to it. We let it challenge us, we let him challenge us to hear the story he has to tell, and then to go back and try and better understand the architecture he has used to tell it.

101 Threadgill, interview.
Appendix 1: Full Interview Texts

With drummer Pheeroan akLaff

So two most important things about Threadgill is: number one he composes for the American drum set, and I can count on one hand the amount of people who have done that in my 40 year career. Two, he brings to his music this depth of experience from being a war veteran. That cannot be discounted in the emotional content of some of his works. In addition to what might appear to you young musicians as this unusual, sometime fragmented, or certainly indiscernible form. I would imagine it would strike you as ‘huh, who does that?’ So I think that has to have contributed to his... [music]. In addition to... coming from Chicago and being a part of the AACM where he and a number of other of his friends were encouraged, you know, to express their individualism.

M: How did you meet Henry? Did you know his music before you met?

When I first joined the sextet, I had only heard it once... Let’s put it this way. We were all part of a 1970’s New York scene, which starting for me, was 1975 when I first worked with Wadada Leo Smith, and much of that was done in the Village, the East Village, Sam Rivers’ loft, and a few other places that would often be these artist run lofts, and on occasion, university settings – the NYU had a music series. He must have heard me playing with Leo, playing with Amina – who might have been the next person that I worked with, I’m not sure – and of course Oliver Lake and Anthony Davis. So that was my group of folks, and he must have heard me in one of those contexts and thought that I would work out in the sextet.

M: What was different about working with Henry as opposed to the other bandleaders you’ve worked with?

He understands history and the Black American experience. He understands the significance of dance, movement, painting - without showing it, he’s an interdisciplinary artist. Because of his comprehension – he understands all these
various art forms enough to be inspired to write for it, write personal things that are descriptions what it must have felt like to see people during the ballroom dancing era, to see the Lunceford band the Eckstein band. So, he brings *that* degree of orchestration to his small units.

In addition to all the other [influences] which are often . . . mentioned by composers in their attempt to show breadth – the Schoenbergs, the Cages, the European orchestration works – he understands the old man sitting on the porch playing the guitar in Mississippi just as much as he does the Inuit person with the instrument that has two tones. So yeah, that’s what I think he brings. He brings this super colorful . . . from knowing a lot about the world, from being – particularly in Vietnam – you know, having those emotional experiences. He’s probably one of the people that I think most lives his experience on the sleeve of his manuscript paper.

**M:** *What do you remember about the compositions Henry wrote for the Sextett? Were they heavily systematized like his more recent work?*

There’s one song that I have to say . . . there’s one song we played in that repertoire that I sing to myself every six months or so. It’s kind of unbelievable. And sometimes it comes upon me and I don’t know why I’m doing that but – man I don’t believe it – but I’m caught in it and I want to stay there. And I’m singing it to myself, nobody else can hear it. It’s something that probably restored my soul, as it were, as a young musician, because I knew I really enjoyed playing it, and I felt like – you know what – I’m actually here. There was a sense of arrival that I had when I played in that ensemble because everyone was more experienced than me – which happened to me a lot when I was younger, I was often the youngest one in the ensemble – but, that experience . . . all the ups and downs of the rigor that came with it – because, I’ll tell you a little secret: we rehearsed 5 days from 10:00 to 1:00 for one concert. Now that tells you something right there right. When you have a concert with some of your friends, how many times do you rehearse? And what time of day do you rehearse?

Matt: Yeah, it’s usually night-time, and usually not enough.
P: Usually night, and usually not enough... [laughs] so that says a lot right there. And I’ll never forget . . thinking ‘man this guy wants to rehearse that much? I don’t believe it. Well I do have the time on my calendar, but man this is a lot’. And then when I got there and saw the music I said ‘Oh. Okay. I’ll be here – early. [laughs].

M: So, it was pretty heavily systematized and composed?

P: Oh, very much so, and was being tweaked every day.

M: How did the music he was writing change from when you first started working with him to when you stopped?

Oh yeah, his system changed, from time to time. That’s what’s really interesting – how he evolved.

M: Is there anything else you think I should know?

Well, no, I think that pretty much says the most important things.
With Seth Rosner of Pi Recordings

M: Could you tell me a little about how the label got started, and if there was a goal at the time?

Our connection was going in and out, so Rosner’s answer to this first question is unusable. He told me about his personal history, and the founding of the label as an organic project in which he wanted to document the music of Henry Threadgill and simultaneously saw a void to be filled in the landscape of the industry.

M: How did the roster come together? Did the artists all know each other, or did Pi find them all independently

Well I was obviously pretty interested, I felt a strong gravitational pull towards the AACM members who – I think they always considered themselves AACM – I think if you ask Henry or Wadada or Roscoe or George Lewis – you know I think they’re AACM from day one until today, maybe less so with Braxton, I think at a certain point Braxton stops considering himself AACM, but sometimes these things are just things they say for the purpose of taking a position. So I felt a strong gravitational pull towards them, but in 2001 – 2002, the AACM is ... I don’t want to overstate, I don’t want to misrepresent it, but it’s not... George is writing his book, people who know what’s going on know that he’s working on this history, but... I don’t want to make this sound more romanticized than it is, but you were just coming out of the young lions. In like ’99 –2000, Sony/Columbia releases a Wynton Marsalis album once a month. That’s not a joke. They literally, I think fulfill his contract... just look it up, there’s a year where every month there is a new Marsalis recording. This is seen as amazing, it’s tough to describe, I mean it is amazing, that’s an incredible feat that someone could have a recording out once a month, it’s not... it is more common today, but at that moment for Sony/Columbia to do it was seen as an incredible feat, and I don’t think it’s seen as bombastic, or no one looks at it and thinks like “oh my god this is the most absurd marketing ploy”. Their albums were like dedications to Louis Armstrong that he’s doing, we’re still really in that period, you have to get that. Jazz at Lincoln Center isn’t open yet, but people are starting to talk about it being built, it’s still really Wynton’s kind of world.
M: yeah, so not a really big moment for AACM and like-minded musicians

S: Exactly, Branford is the head of A&R at Columbia, and he’s doing cool stuff, he’s signing David S. Ware, I mean he does very little stuff to be totally honest, he signs very few people, but he signs David S. Ware I mean he has some – yeah I think he signs Bela Fleck whatever, it’s still very much that world, and the AACM is really not that much a part of it. There’s not a lot of representation of the quote unquote underground or the avant-garde in the larger picture. And the AACM is certainly a part of something, but they’re not really being discussed I think the way they are today, certainly the way are post George Lewis

M: right, that book changed a lot, I’m sure.

Seth: yeah that changed a lot. That frames a lot of things, that brings a lot of attention. And you know they’re sort of not there publically, I mean they’re still there for who they are, and they’ve got shows every year in New York, but it’s not as public a thing because you don’t yet have the Vijay Iyers, the Jason Morans, the Tyshawn Soreys . . . [people like] Steve Lehman, you don’t yet have these people saying these guys are a huge part of my influence. What you’ve got is T.S. Monk making dedication albums to his dad. It’s that kind of a world.

So I’m pretty drawn to these guys, I want to document their music and it’s pretty simple in a way because I’m drawn to them. I don’t have to seek them out necessarily – things go well with Henry, Roscoe reaches out and he expresses awareness of what we did with Threadgill and that he would like to do some stuff. And again, I don’t want to oversell it, Roscoe had just done an ECM recording with the Note Factory. At that time – it doesn’t come out for many years – Lester Bowie has passed and the trio Art Ensemble do an ECM recording that sits in the vaults for a couple of years. So it’s not that they’re not working, it’s far from it. But they’re just not out there in the kind of recognized way they are today.

So, for whatever reason –maybe through learning more about Henry – I just begin to really appreciate what the AACM stood for. Their organization is incredibly cooperative, and they don’t sound anything like anybody else, and it’s all about original composition. The most striking difference between what they’re
doing and what’s happening [in the mainstream] is that they are embracing the now.

MF: Right, they’re not looking backwards.

SR: Exactly, and I guess I’m smart enough to figure out that there can only be so many versions of “On Green Dolphin Street” before you’re just going to say “no more, I’m bored to death already”. So, I gravitate towards them and I start doing some stuff with them, and little by little – the stuff with Roscoe is super exciting and cool – and between Roscoe and Henry, I begin to meet some younger people like Vijay, like Taborn, like Liberty Ellman, like Corey Wilkes. And I begin to think ‘wow, if this is something I’m going to continue doing, the model here can’t just be recording the AACM”, because that’s kind of shallow, my interests are beyond that. What would be really cool would be to have a bit of a Blue Note model where people are recording essentially as sidemen – you build a reputation for the label, they build a reputation as players – such that when they step forwards as leaders, there’s familiarity with them, people maybe have some interest, and you can bring people to them who may not have been there if you hadn’t set the stage so to speak.

M: Can you talk a little more about that model? You’re referring to the sidemen of people like Roscoe and Henry?

S: Yeah, exactly. So the first four recordings are the two Threadgills, the Roscoe and the Wadada Leo Smith Golden Quartet. the Wadada Leo Smith is essentially an all veterans band, it’s Wadada, Malachi [Favors], Anthony Davis and [Jack] DeJohnette, but Threadgill has Liberty Ellman in Zooid, it has Dafnis Prieto on drums . . . the Roscoe has Vijay on piano, Craig on piano, Corey Wilkes on trumpet. So there’s –to me – this interesting thing that is kind of like an Art Blakey thing – these guys are mentoring younger musicians, and they found musicians who are not just good players, but some of them philosophically understand what they’re doing. They’re not AACM members, but they’ve taken the best parts of the AACM – the idea of original composition, and self-fulfillment – and they’re beginning to carry that forwards.
Some of them are pretty strong individuals, namely Liberty, Vijay and Craig, so after the Wadada recording, the next recording we do is Vijay, Aaron Stewart and Elliot Humberto Kavee, who by that time is also drumming with Threadgill. And that band is called Fieldwork, and for me, that is still one of my favorite recordings on the label, but was a serious pivotal moment because if the label was going to be anything, it couldn’t just be AACM. But the self-determination of the AACM – and listen, any musician trying to make it in New York has to have some level of self-determination but, in 2001, if you meet Vijay, you can pretty quickly gather that he’s not fumbling. And I took that to be like ‘man this guy had really learned something from the AACM’. And to be completely transparent, Muhal going to hear Vijay play live, Andrew Hill was going to hear Vijay play live, Henry was going to hear Vijay play live, and they were not going to hear them at amazing places. It was not like it is today where Vijay’s got a week at the Vanguard. So if you’re getting Andrew Hill, Muhal and Henry to come out to check out your gigs in clubs that they would otherwise not be at particularly often, that says something.

So that catches my attention, and working with Vijay and the Fieldwork group was kind of like a real moment. So to your original question – did I have to go find people out, what was it about – it was a very kind of organic thing – again it really flowed out of the AACM and those guys. After Vijay the next recording was a duo between Wadada and Braxton, ok that’s a no-brainer to be able to document that. And then after that, the next recording is like a re-formed Art Ensemble, ok that’s kind of a no-brainer, but again it’s all super AACM centric. But the next recording after that is a Liberty Ellman date as a leader that very much just came out of all the work with Henry. And then after that, is a Vijay recording with Mike Ladd. Then there’s another duo with Wadada and Braxton, and then there’s another art ensemble, and then there’s a Revolutionary Ensemble thing, but then shortly thereafter, Rudresh enters the scene, and that’s an extension of the relationship with Vijay – so it’s just to say that a lot of this stuff happened really organically through the people that were mentoring with these guys.

And we just looked at the ones that we thought – well the ones that we enjoyed the most, the ones whose music we were really captivated by – and who, not just the self-determination but also the three things that most attracted us were this idea of ‘you write your own music’ – you’re out there doing your own
music, you’re leading a band – you’re keeping people together and the music is benefiting from repeated performance, repeated practice and everyone contributing. And you have something to say that is uniquely you. No one is going to confuse you for anyone else. And those are three pretty basic concepts, but if you can execute all three of those at a high level, you’re off to a pretty good start.

We thought that was pretty obvious with Vijay, we thought that was super obvious with Rudresh and following Rudresh, Steve Lehman was on the label. Now at this point it’s been a couple of years, but it was that basic. Your question was how did we do this, was there a scene that we were involved in, it wasn’t really a scene – it was just an appreciation for the AACM and kind of understanding ‘alright if we’re going to do this, what is the natural extension’.

M: There were networks of mentorship and sidemen between all of these artists though, from what you’re saying.

SR: There absolutely were. it’s just to say that in 2018, I think things – listen it’s been 17 years, things should look better – but in 2001, 2002, 2003 there wasn’t really a scene. I remember seeing this guys in the basement of movie theaters. That’s not a joke. And we were excited that there was a movie theater! One of Braxton’s Wesleyan students put together this little festival held in the basement of I think either Archive Film or the Film Forum. And Lehman played there with Jonathan [Finlayson]. It was like playing in my living room – I’m sitting in my living room and this is bigger than that was. I remember hearing Lehman playing in what used to be called CBGB Gallery which was like an offshoot of CBGBs, and you were psyched that those gigs were happening. You were like ‘oh my god it’s so great, they’re getting out and getting gigs’. I can’t imagine those gigs were anything.

So there wasn’t a scene, it’s a strange thing. They knew each other – but Lehman was new to the city, Lehman had just finished at Wesleyan. I think I saw Lehman in one of Braxton’s ensembles at Wesleyan. Vijay and Rudresh knew each other a bit from the west coast, they knew each other through [Steve] Coleman, so there was a bit more of a connection there. But I didn’t hear about Tyshawn until... I don’t even remember. It’s weird, it wasn’t like you could look... the biggest part of the ‘scene’ so to speak was the fact that Vijay and Liberty knew each other from
the west coast. And Rudresh was there. There was kind of that, but it wasn’t what it is today where you could look and talk about a part of music that involves all these people as well as Taborn, Moran, Jen Shyu . . . that thing wasn’t really like that. It was much different.

M: What do you see Pi’s role to be in the creative music community? How has that evolved?

SR: For almost 28 releases, and I say that because the 28th release was Rudresh’s *Kinsman* which kind of turned the corner for us in a way. People were pretty impressed that we could do two Threadgills simultaneously and that caught some people’s attention, people were impressed with the Art Ensemble – through sheer coincidence, we wound up releasing it within a week of that ECM release that I mentioned before, that trio they sat on for four or five years – so a lot of things occurred that brought a lot attention to us – we brought the Revolutionary Ensemble back together – plus Vijay’s release with Mike Ladd *In What Language* captures a lot of attention. It’s very close to 9/11, the world is still very much – no matter what you think the world is today . . . the world is really freaked out in 2003/2004. And that album really spoke to something that I think people had an issue verbalizing. There hadn’t been a musical representation of it that I can think of.

So we were doing some stuff that caught people’s attention, but then . . . it takes 6 or 7 years of us blindly continuing to do what we do because we enjoy it – we think it’s fun, we enjoy hanging out with the artists. We got to work with the reformed Art Ensemble, that was incredible; we got to work with James Blood Olmer, by the time PI 21 occurs, now we’re starting to work with Muhal [Richard Abrams], that’s phenomenal – to be able to document Muhal, this is our dream come true. We’re just doing it because frankly we’re enjoying ourselves, but we’re not – we’re starting to make some inroads, people are appreciating what we’re doing, but it’s still pretty small. People are still describing us as ‘avant-garde’. And all the music we’re doing as avant-garde. And we’re pretty conscious to never use that word. In fact, we actually are pushing back and speaking about the music in another way. We really dislike anyone that calls it avant-garde, we’re politely saying ‘mm it’s not avant-garde you’re just – no offense to you – you are just not
actually embracing what’s happening now, and where we’re going to be sooner rather than later’. So our role in it is... since we’re the spokesperson for so many of these releases, and so many of these artists, I think having a unified message, or a consistent message, of ‘this is not avant-garde’ – Rudresh does not play free. In fact, if you think Rudresh is playing free, you’re sort of an idiot – you are in the wrong job if you’re writing about this music and you think he plays free. If you think that Vijay – if you can’t tell the difference between improvisation and what these guys are writing, you need to stop, step back and listen and begin to understand essentially new approaches to composition. We keep stressing that, but in a polite way, we don’t want to be aggressive, we’re not calling people stupid, that’s never going to be effective. Our role becomes... I don’t know how to put it into words...

M: Would you say you’re like an advocate for this kind of music?

SR: Yeah, exactly. We’re an advocate, but we’re also really showing a lot of patience with people and continually engaging. That’s the best way to put it – we are continuing to engage them and challenge when necessary and try to reshape their perspective and approach. And we’re very fortunate because people like Gary Giddins will write about us sometimes, people are beginning to come around like Ben Ratliff or Nate Chinen and people are beginning to get a bit excited. And I’m not going to say that the economic crash in 2008 has anything to do with this, but I’m just going to say that it’s interesting that the world begins to step back and question a lot of the principles that it had been running on. People were like ‘jeez maybe we have to reassess all these things that we accepted’ and suddenly we are accepted in a different way.

M: That is really interesting.

S: I’m just throwing that out to you – that’s a soft ball, go hit it if you want. At a moment where consciously or not, people have to step back and reassess and be like ‘oh my god, Jesus maybe things aren’t quite what I thought’ Rudresh’s *Kinsmen* does really well. Like ridiculously well. And I’ll also say that it’s really fascinating that the album that does – the first album that does ridiculously well for us – is an
album that blends cultures in a really overt way. Rudresh was always touching on that stuff, Vijay was always touching on that stuff, but with *Kinsmen* it’s super overt. And maybe people were just ready. Maybe people were just more open-minded whether they realized it or not, and from then on out, to this day – and different things have changed – all hell broke loose.

We brought Threadgill back onto the label and that was beyond exciting for people, we got Steve Coleman onto the label, and that’s a whole other thing. Suddenly Steve’s recording for a US label again, and we’re suddenly not just an AACM proponent, but people are like ‘oh hey, by the way, the most important thing to happen to music in the past thirty years is actually Steve Coleman’s influence’, and all these other guys that at least philosophically that aligned themselves with the AACM – because there’s not really an AACM style to take from – all these guys have heavy traces of what most people would refer to as M-Base in their playing. And suddenly, this huge – that had always been there, but Steve being back on a US label and having a bit more presence here – that stuff was just like an avalanche.

At the same time, Steve Lehman does *Travail, Transformation and Flow*, where he’s very transparent about his use of spectral harmony, and that stuff just starts flooring people. That there’s a whole new way – the way people are hearing the chords and the group dynamic – people are like ‘oh my god’. So we go through this two-three year run, where everything is really fresh and new for people. And it’s also causing people to look back and reflect on all the stuff we had done leading up to that, such that we’re no longer these guys that are do-gooders documenting stuff. All of a sudden it’s like ‘how the hell did these guys get here, how did all this happen?’ At one moment in time, we’ve got Threadgill, Muhal, Coleman, Lehman, Tyshawn – the amount of people on the label that are just at a zenith of their creativity at one time, it just caught people’s attention.

So what role did we play? We just figured out a way to maintain that, bring all that stuff together, talk about the music in a way that we thought the artists wanted to have their art talked about. For years we had such an abhorrence for the words ‘avant-garde’ that when people began discussing the music – all the press releases we put out for every album, we were just forcing a different dialogue. We just wanted to have a different conversation. If you were going to talk about it, you have to talk about it the way we’re discussing it. And if you’re going to use your
language, you’re going to look awfully silly because we’re putting out a pretty strong countercurrent.

**M: How has the (generally very challenging and envelope pushing) music been received by the marketplace? The general public? Critics? Have you seen that change over time?**

**S: I think the word avant-garde is used less, which is a positive. If that means anything, it means that what we’re working with is more prevalent in the world such that it is no longer this thing that is coming, it is here, it is now. And I think that the artists – in part, if you spend the better part of seven decades doing one thing, I think people will stop pigeon-holing you and trying to define you. They’ll just be like ‘you know what, that’s just that person’. So Threadgill’s no longer avant-garde, Roscoe’s not avant-garde, Muhal’s not avant-garde. These guys are just not going away, and not joking. This is not an experiment for them, it’s not a fad, they’re not trying to test our patience. At first I think some people are naturally frustrated, they’re not familiar with it, they don’t know how to address it, so they kind of project and say ‘oh this is this’ or ‘this person is x, y and z’, and then after a while you kind of have to give that up. You’ve got to get off that. It’s not Andy Kaufman, this is not the world’s longest running joke, you’ve got to move past that. So, for whatever reason, people moved past it, and the way that they began describing it essentially was by dealing with the artist as an individual.

So the artist is no longer a part of this larger avant-garde movement. Henry Threadgill is one of America’s greatest composers. Roscoe Mitchel is – I’m saying America because I have a particularly American-centric view of these things, because for us it was always pretty important to document American musicians. Henry, Roscoe, these are people that are tirelessly composing and working to explore further realms of music, and they should be discussed in the same manner that you would discuss Stockhausen, that you would discuss Cage, throw any modern composer there that you like. They just began dealing with the individual, they just finally said ‘man after decades of work, I’ve just got to deal with this person’s body of work, I can’t keep grouping them in some weird thing’.

In parallel, when you begin to have the level of success that Jason Moran has, that Vijay has, that Taborn has, that Rudresh has, and they’re all pretty
overtly mentioning these other people, or through their playing it’s undeniable that it’s there, you’ve got to suddenly say ‘oh man, if I wasn’t affected by these people’s music, these other people were, and they’re going to be doing this for decades now. So if I want to deal with writing about music, if I want to be an active participant in what art vis a vis music is today, I probably have to start dealing with this stuff’. And I can’t relegate it to avant-garde, and I can’t say it’s some funny small niche, I’ve got to give it its due.

Suddenly Ornette gets a Pulitzer, what are you going to say? Cecil is old, Ornette is old, you have gone through generations of the quote unquote avant-garde and those guys are not avant-garde. And I haven’t reference him because we have nothing overtly to do with him, but John Zorn’s effect on people. People just had to get that if there was something called be-bop or hard bop or swing or trad., those are all just names and that’s fine man, but make some room for these other people. It became less about speaking about them as if they were these weird troublemakers – nah man, they had created real bodies of work. Their bodies of work were so real that other people settled in to begin to learn those bodies of work, and draw inspiration from it.

And I think what really happened – and you can say what you want about any of the AACM members facility on their instruments. One thing, maybe, and in some manners Muhal doesn’t fit this mold, if there was anything questionable about any of the AACM guys it maybe was their facility on their instruments. Muhal and George I think are exceptions to that rule. But all the people who took inspiration from them? If they were going to make it today? They had to know how to play. So what are you going to say when Tyshawn looks you dead in the eye and talks to you about how important that music is to him? And most people can’t hold a candle to his technical abilities, let alone his compositional abilities, let alone his understanding of music. People had to step back and just reevaluate all their preconceived notions, because they had just approached it from the wrong perspective. Which is fine, but they had just approached it as if they were Bird or Miles Davis or Trane or Sonny Rollins, they brought to it what little information they had. They weren’t inside their minds, they didn’t know where they were going with it or what they were trying to do, but someone figured it out and when those people became more prominent and quite obviously people that were going to be
around for quite some time that were going to have to be dealt with in their own right, it just changed.

So what happened? I don’t know, people began saying that Threadgill’s one of the greatest living composers, and he winds up getting a Pulitzer. People praise roscoe Mitchel as . . . I don’t now what words have not been used to describe Roscoe. Wadada becomes a finalist for the politer. People talk about Muhal as not just a performer and a composer and a pianist, but like people talk about Monk – someone who inspired a generation of people to think in a certain way. And Steve Coleman, man, you can’t throw a stone and not hit somebody who has taken some part of what Steve has introduced into the modern vernacular. Who is not employing some of that?

Nothing happened except determination, which had been going on the whole time. I tend to think about it like water on a stone, these drops of water hit the stone and nothing happens, but come back twenty years later and those drops of water hitting the stone? Man that stone is a different shape. That persistence, that continued repetition, and that never backing down, you will win.

M: Thanks for your time!
With Zooid guitarist Liberty Ellman:

MF: How did you get started working with Threadgill? Were you familiar with his music beforehand?
LE: Yeah absolutely. The first record I heard of Henry’s I believe was . . . called *Too Much Sugar For a Dime*
LE: [His] band called Very Very Circus, you probably know that record.
MF: yeah
LE: Right, so that was the first one I heard, I can’t remember what year that was exactly... sometime in... late 80’s I guess [the record came out in 1993]. And then I saw that band, they played at Concepts Cultural Gallery, Oakland California, and it was really mind-blowing [inaudible]. I was still a student at that time and – you know I went to a pretty progressive school where whatever you were in to, they were really trying to help you get to that. So it wasn’t overly dogmatic but ... obviously if you’re studying jazz performance and there’s a degree involved, there’s a certain amount of ... let’s say uh ... more programmatic information that you have to deal with.
MF: yeah, for sure
LE: which is fine, I mean, it’s great. But, Henry, along with Steve Coleman and some other people when I really got exposed to AACM and stuff like that, you know it really helped me open my mind to the possibility that what something under the umbrella of jazz music could really be, in terms of understanding what creative improvisational music and things like that were – and melds into composition – and just kind of making it feel like it was music that like – it didn’t have an expiration date.
MF: right, yeah.
LE: You know what I mean? Like it wasn’t really of a [period] whereas a lot times the way people approach jazz traditionally is like were playing music of a certain period, which is great and it’s vital music but it’s just – it somehow can be hard for a younger person to connect to their current generation so I felt like Henry’s music . . . always breaks that boundary, you know, . . . he thinks as a composer and he’s a modern thinker and so his music is always fresh. You know it doesn’t matter how old he is, it’s not bound in any particular stasis you know.
So anyway, I was definitely familiar with Henry and then it was years later when I – I was originally from New York but I lived in California for a long time – when I came back to New York . . . I had a job for a while at a record company – Blue Note Records? Might have heard of it? [laughs] Yeah, and the A&R guy – his name was Brian Bacchus – became a good friend of mine, he became sort of my best advocate in town . . . and I had a regular Tuesday night gig with my trio at a place called Ciel Rouge, which was uh it’s not there anymore but it was a bar on 7th avenue between 21st and 22nd. So Brian used to come down there all the time and he lived in Brooklyn not too far from me so we would share taxis sometimes, and um after one of my gigs he was asking me who I wanted to play with . . . like what was next for me, and I had played with some people that I really like, like Greg Osby, a little bit, Steve Coleman, and some other people, and that was when Henry came to mind, I said you know Henry Threadgill is a really interesting composer, I think he would be really fun to play with. And he was like Oh! I know Henry, let me call him right now!

M: oh man

L: Yeah so he takes out his cell phone and calls Henry while we’re in the cab, and I’m sitting there like embarrassed like no no no no don’t call him man and he’s like no no no I’m calling him. And so he calls Henry and says something like ‘hey Henry it’s Brian and I’m out with a great guitar player who wants to play with you, you should check him out’. And Henry being the kind of person he is, cause he’s so curious, he figures, well okay let me hear - this cat’s into my music, let hear what he’s all about. And so the very next week he came to my gig at the Ciel Rouge.

M: oh wow

L: And then 30 days later, he calls me and asked me if I wanted to play in Zooid.

M: wow, that’s awesome.

L: yeah, kind of a fun story.

M: so –

L: but that’s a testament to the way Henry thinks, because, first of all if you’re going to get involved with someone like henry who’s very prolific and writes a lot of music and and expects a lot from the band, . . . he really wants people to be dedicated to the music and put in the time to learn the system that he’s got, so he needs people who are already interested from the go. He’s not trying to put together some kind of all-star band, it’s more about putting together an ensemble
that really wants to make this music. We’ve had various personnel shifts over the years, but it’s been pretty solid for most of that time and everybody’s been really dedicated and really a believer – as other former Threadgill musicians that I’ve talked to over the years say, you have to really believe in it.

M: How is Threadgill different from other bandleaders and composers you’ve worked with?
L: The thing about Henry is that he has what I refer to as ‘follow-through’, which is one of the underestimated quantities in a successful artist. He gets an idea, and then he does it. He has a thought, ‘I want to do this’, and it doesn’t mean that every time it’s going to work, but that isn’t the point. For example, we’ll come in and do some music – and he had written this extensive thing for me that had these [really high] ledger lines, and I was struggling to read it a little bit – and he was like “oh!” and so he decided to start writing a lot higher for me. It was like ‘you need to work on this so I’m going to write it into some music’. And that wasn’t necessarily the only reason, because I don’t think he does anything for a purely academic or functional reason unless he wants to experiment, but the point is that he takes action on his ideas. I think a lot of talented people have a lot of good ideas but then they don’t necessarily get around to doing things. It takes too long to do one thing, or things don’t align properly to allow people to follow through on everything. But Henry is one of those people.

There’s another aspect of his [nature] where he just has a gift for rehearsing the band. It’s not really like ‘read it down and play the music’, he really will break down all the parts. He’ll want to hear what he’s written like any composer would, or like in a chamber music ensemble, we’ll play certain passages and then he’ll listen to all the parts and figure out if everything’s working, maybe make adjustments, and then he’ll start working on the forms while we’re rehearsing. There’s a certain malleability to the composition that is unusual. I think a lot of times, certainly with the younger generation, it’s harder to get people to rehearse six or seven times for a gig, and so people come in with their chart and it’s almost set in stone – they play every note perfect and that’s it. Henry not – he wants the music to be perfect but he also wants it to grow. He wants to hear how it lives, how
it breathes, and then he’ll tighten it up or loosen it depending on what’s happening. So he has a lot of approaches to determining whether or not he thinks a piece of music is working. There’s not many bandleaders that I’ve worked with who have that sort of approach. Some people might be open to changing things, but it come across more as being undecided, where Henry is actually involving you in the process, which is different than being undecided.

M: Threadgill’s music – especially the music for Zooid – blends composition and improvisation so seamlessly it’s sometimes hard to tell where one starts and the other stops. Can you talk a little bit about what a Zooid score looks like?  
L: It’s not that different than looking at [jazz] charts. This was the first band where he really went deep in on his interval system, which he’s slightly phasing out at this point because he’s been doing it for so long. You’ll have your chart which has your part on it, much like a chamber [group]. If you look at a score for a string quartet, that’s what this music looks like. He writes things on a score first, and then gives you your part. So your part may or may not have the melody. In terms of the information there, it’s written much as any sort of composed music is. But then much like a jazz chart, you also have the harmony going in the staff underneath. But his harmony looks a little different because he writes with cells instead of chord changes. So he’ll write a chord that says EF/G# – so G# would be the bass and then there’s two notes on top. Most of the time it’s a 3 note chord, sometimes there’s an extra note, but that’s how he demonstrates the harmony. Most of these chords are not necessarily identifiable as a major or a minor chord, but also the composition isn’t coming from a diatonic system, so it doesn’t make sense theoretically to write them out as chord changes. So having the cells there is more specific because it’s like this is the sound moving from one to another. In terms of his interval system, he’ll show you what interval set he’s using to generate these chords, and then you kind of use those intervals to move between the chords.

M: when you say interval set, is he using a numerical set class notation?  
L: Yeah he is, so he might pick one chord that he likes in particular and that chord has a certain relationship between the notes. It might have a minor second, a major second, a fourth a major 6th and a minor 6th. So those would be intervals that
he would be able to generate by looking at different inversions of this chord. Different chords will have different interval sets, and then once you have an interval set [phone connection was interrupted] . . . you can take the interval set from a chord and start generating other chords that have the same interval set. You think about that interval set almost like a key or mode or something, and you can start to improvise in – I’m just going to call it a mode, that’s not really correct, he wouldn’t want to call it that, but just for you to understand it – so you might look at those intervals and improvise on some sort of a shape that contains those intervals. When we’re actually playing the piece – when we’re playing the written piece, we’re all playing the written music, it’s pretty much as it is on the page. There’s a little room for interpretation, giving the notes life – sliding into things, altering the dynamic and the timbre of your attack – he really wants you to express the music. So again, if you were playing in a chamber ensemble, depending on your conductor, they would want you to do more or less of that kind of thing – not just play the notes flat. Some of it is indicated, but he tries to leave a lot of room for you to put your stamp on it. So we’re playing that, but the thing is, the way it’s written it can be hard to decipher… I think what makes it hard to pick up stuff off the records, or even in the performances, isn’t just that the music is sort of - it has a level of abstraction – it has more to do with the fact that the forms are very complicated. So, once you’ve played the written material, then you (just like a jazz chart) you have this music going around, but because it’s not diatonic harmony, nobody’s playing those kind of clichés or cadences that help ground you

M: Right

You don’t hear the 2-5-1s and go ‘oh there’s the top again’. Because all these bars have different time signatures and the harmony can be quite dissonant or quite open, but if you listen hard enough you do hear – I always tell people look if you’re looking for something to grab on to, start with listening to the bottom. If the tuba or the cello are playing the bass portion, listen to that and see if you can hear where it repeats and try and count the beats from where the harmony changes. And over time you can start to hear the form. We’re playing a form just like if you’re playing a tune, but the thing is, imagine you have a jazz chart and it has four sections: A, B, C, and D right, so Henry might write a piece that has A, B, C and D.
but while we’re rehearsing it he might say “Oh you know what, I really like the way D sounds, so let’s repeat the D section 4 times before we start playing the melody at A. And he might say play . . . the written part without the melody at letter D, or he might say somebody improvise at letter D and then we’ll go to A and play the melody. So a piece might start you’ll hear somebody soloing on a portion of the piece that’s actually the back half.

How has his music changed in the 15 or so years you’ve worked with him?
It’s developed in terms of the way we perform it. It’s become less and less... think of it like playing outside the changes. When you use the interval system during the written material, it’s pretty important to stick to it in terms of following the voice leading, so the chords work correctly. When we’re playing the harmony parts, generally what he’s doing is breaking up the notes between us. So I might have the top two notes of the harmony and Chris might have the bottom note, or I might have two notes and tuba will have the bottom and Chris will be playing the melody. In any case, he’s separating the harmony among the instruments, again sort of like a chamber group. So the thing is, when you move between the chords, you want to follow the intervals into the next voice leading. For example, if a chord has a tritone – no a tritone is not a good example because it’s a mirror. If it has a sixth, but not a minor sixth, you can go up from a C to an A, but if there’s no minor third, you can’t go down from C to A. So you need to look at how you choose your notes and stay true to his form. But over the years, because our ears have grown more intuitive in relationship to the harmony, we’re able to deviate from that and play more unpredictable or relative harmony. So I think the group has definitely grown in our interpretation of the system, but the system itself is fairly simple, so it didn’t really change that much. It has more to do with where he’s generating his harmony from. It’s really a function of the composition process.

M: Have you noticed a change in the public’s reception to Zooid since the group was first formed? Did people get it immediately? Or did it take a while.

So I started playing with him in 2000, and Henry was already Henry Threadgill, you know what I mean? His fans are pretty willing. When you play with someone like that, you’re bringing people that want to be challenged. I would say that we’ve
been in situations where maybe you play at a jazz festival or some kind of concert series where people come and they don’t actually know what they’re coming to hear, and this is not unique to Henry by any means – a lot of creative ensembles end up at jazz festivals and you play like five minutes and people start leaving. And that’s certainly happened to us, especially in different parts of the world. We played in the Ukraine and they had pictures up at the bus station and the whole thing – you would think that he was Justin Bieber the way that they advertised the concert. And there was a good portion of the audience who were just like ‘oh shit what is this??’. Or we played at the Iridium one time and a family came in – I guess they just said ‘oh let’s go hear some jazz!’ and they were sitting down eating steaks right in front of the stage, and we start playing and you could see that they start cutting really fast like ‘uh-oh’…. But I don’t think that anybody is too concerned with.. I would say that maybe the music got a little more abstract when he started using the interval system just because there was more counterpoint going on than some of the previous music, so perhaps it took a while. And also with the instrumentation, he’s trying to focus on what are perceived as acoustic instruments even though we’re usually all amped up. I think there was a certain sound of it – a certain vibe – that was a little bit different, but he had done so many projects before that, that I just think, like I said, his audience is ready to be surprised. And I think people who don’t know the music, if they’re curious types like a lot European audiences, or when you play at a museum or something like that, there’s a certain crowd that are kind of art focused and so it’s the same kind of people who can look at a Kandinsky and not complain that they don’t see any people in it. That’s more a function of the jazz scene – we see less of your traditional jazz types at the concerts and more just open arty people. There is crossover, but there’s a lot of jazz scholars who have told me that they really like Henry, but I’ve never seen them at a concert.

**M: How has working with Henry influenced your own music?**

I think it’s definitely opened my ears a lot. He has an incredibly strong sense of rhythm, and the way he writes rhythms. And the way that he can thread a line, play this unusual shape and then have it come around and be extremely melodically satisfying. It’s a great combination – this really strong rhythm, kind of an abstract harmony, but then with a super serious melodic intent. I would say that in all those areas, I’ve learned a lot and grown a lot playing in his band. It’s given me extra
tools to write. And again, his forms are very unique, and the way that he goes about arranging his forms has definitely influenced me. in my music I definitely find myself pushing and trying to do things that are similar to that – not to achieve the same result, but to push myself to do something interesting and not settle for any kind of formula that’s worked for me in the past, which is harder than it sounds.

M: Is there anything else you think I should know?

No.. It’s funny – one of those times we played at the Iridium, there was a group of students who came to see the show and then they talked to him afterwards, and he said ‘how old are you?’ and they said ‘oh 19 or 20’ and he said ‘well, I’m three times as old as you, but I bet you sound older than me!’ Which is an interesting view of the way he thinks.

M: I guess also about how folks teach jazz

L: Well people teach what they can understand, they teach a system that they know works. So teaching a certain kind of system to play jazz is one thing, but it’s hard to teach someone how to be curious or be an artist, and how to push yourself and how to break rules and all those things. And Henry has never been shy about doing any of that stuff, so I think probably if he had the choice of imparting wisdom on people, he would want that to rub off. He’d like to see people following the path of resistance more, and not just trying to worry about what people want to hear, or what’s going to get you a gig here or there. He came up in a different time, and there are different challenges that younger artists face, and he’s aware of that and we’ve talked about those things, but he’s had the luxury of being able to push through that stuff and have success. He’s a good example for sticking to your guns if you’re a creative person. Just following it even if everyone tells you it’s not working, if you really believe in it then you just keep going. The more work you do, the more success you’re going to have – in terms of the work, you can’t guarantee success commercially or any other way, but in terms of creating the best work that you know how to create – that comes from sincerity and conviction and he demonstrates that very well. I meet a lot of musicians who are completely not
about that, who are just trying to get famous or something, and oftentimes the music doesn’t work because they’re trying to force it. And it’s like ‘no’ what you do is force yourself to be yourself and people will come to you – maybe a little slower, but it happens.

M: That’s inspiring. Alright well thanks for your time!
Selected Discography

**Henry Threadgill**
Open Air Suit (1978)
X-75 (1979)
Air Lore (1979)
Rag, Bush And All (1988)
Everybodys Mouth’s A Book (2001)
This Brings Us To, Volume II (2010)
In for a Penny, In for a Pound (2015)
Dirt...And More Dirt (2018)

**Steve Lehman**
Travail, Transformation and Flow (2009)

**Vijay Iyer**
Accelerando (2012)
Far From Over (2017)

**Rudresh Manthappa**
Kinsmen (2008)

**Tyshawn Sorey**
Oblique-I (2011)
The Inner Spectrum of Variables (2016)
Pillars (2018)

**The Next Wave:**

**Liberty Ellman**
Ophiuchus Butterfly (2005)
Radiate (2015)

**Craig Taborn**
Chants
Daylight Ghosts
Bibliography


———. "Interview with Henry Threadgill." By Ethan Iverson. *Do The M@th*.
