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Listener as Operator

By Howard Slater

The 'compositional improvising' of jazz, from big band to free to AACM, is, in its shared precarity, 'tellingly inarticulate' - writes Howard Slater in this month's Mute Music Column

Throwing handfuls

of pebbles on

the hollow tree

sprinkling of tones

thuds of sunder

coastal cymbals

Pre-history

In the beginning there was rhythm. Thank fuck there was drumming before language. Hope there in the heartbeat, the well untempered random learning to talk. 'Banging on tree trunks' says drummer Andrew Cyrille. And not just to communicate a message, a warning against the advent of vowels, but a belonging too, an intuitive belonging to the sustaining of the other's flow. Keep it up. Keep it backed up but non-repressed. Keep it pre-articulate, 'tellingly inarticulate'. Make mistake room inside the random rhythms. An inclusiveness. Bird song. Pipe drip. Roger Blank, a Sun Ra drummer, says: 'You've got coordinated independence which demonstrates how important it is to get into a collective individuality. And that's what the four limbs are about.' There's unity in ego abeyance, unity in listening to be touched. A collective individuality - an Arkestra, an Art Ensemble - not mass individuals, but constructive sidemen presiding over the solo's demise; invisible 'names' like in the time before proper nouns to come. Or, as another Ra-ist, Ronnie Boykins, titled an album 10 years in the pipeline: 'the will come, is now'. The 'will come' is to mutate: the collision of four limbs and three drums on an open urban plain, four limbs, all bone and muscle, becoming sensitised feelers banging out insistent resistance until walls fall... and yet still able, simultaneously, to brush a sprinkle of stones and fondle the forlorn into a quiet, reviving paroxysm.

[IMAGE]

Image: King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, San Francisco 1921

Music and Agony (1)

How many times has it been said: 'I can't live without music'? Or 'it was music kept me going when she died'. There's something in emotional precarity, the end of our world, the withdrawal of hope, which music can match. I think of a story I heard. A man gripped by the tension of an anticipatory loss. A man, like many men, suffering from a blockage in the chest that gripped upwards toward the dry throat, a blockage so tight and welling that 'reservoir of tears' can pass as an actually lived cliché ('it's then you know you're in trouble' he said... 'when clichés and sentimentality ring through to undam our intellectual defences'). This clogged blockage was eased, he said, by a sudden pitch shift, a minor vortex in Mahler... by a little crystal-forming diminuendo on a keyboard... the song at the end of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. But more:

there was this accompanying need to hear myself moan, to make the agony resound through my chest, to suppress a howl into a bass croak and hear this elemental kind of music, the sounds of a not yet syllabic cavity. This too broke the blockage, the thoraxed mucus of solidified tears.

With callous distance I think of the sound poetry of Henri Chopin, its reattesting to a communicative level akin to 'bare life'. At an even greater distance I recall a book and look up a Klossowski phrase: '... for even though language is the usurper, it never allows us to speak of our unintelligible depth.' The sad thing is, though, that this 'depth', in such agonising moments, is hardly that far away. The 'depth' is rising to the moebius surface and it (the unintelligible emotional polyphony) doesn't speak an abecedarian language. It sounds like birthing pangs, like an untrained tongue roving to clack the palate, like unmeasured croaking babble, like the psychic suffocation of human capitals. So, the musicians tip us off like theorists never can: 'every human being has a non-tempered psyche' (Ornette Coleman), an alterity, an unmeasurable polyphony that's made to denounce its squaking ambivalence by the last bar in a linear easing. And this is what it sounds like.

2009 O.C.

The first time I heard Ornette Coleman's voice was not so long ago and I repeated it, kept pushing the button. He was in Stockholm at the Golden Circle and it was 1965. With boyish enthusiasm I immediately likened it to the voice of Eric Dolphy as he celebrates and yet mourns, in light tones, the passing of the music he has just played: 'when you hear music, after it's over it's gone into the air. You can never capture it again'. Like Dolphy, Coleman had this same diminishing-to-inaudibility type of voice; gentle and deflective of attention. With a further defensive connectivity I linked both of these voices to a phrase by Caribbean Surrealist, René Maril: '...transgression of your own limits through embracing the groundswell of blind sincerity'. So, then, the last time I heard Ornette Coleman's voice was more recently at the Royal Festival Hall. It had become inaudible. He bowed over the microphone and spoke in a millisecond whisper. And yet Maril's impossible sincerity was audible all night long, it was unmistakable. The voice and the saxophone reached a symbiosis; the breath, that most precious of facilitators, seemed, in the 'harmolodic' language that followed in flows, to give an added flesh to his recently reported words: 'I play things that heal people. You know what healing is? Something that brings tears and clarity to the heart.'

Healing may well be to hear a player who is ahead of the melodic line or behind it, who strays into a territory that can sound 'off' and 'out' whilst still firmly stooled in an auditorium especially designed for gridwork renditions. It's here we are gathered before a 79 year old man who plays to repudiate his legendary status, who is defended by audience members ('turn Ornette up!') because, who knows, do we all sense his vulnerability before high expectations and low lung power? Is it this sense of a shared vulnerability that heals? Is it the keyed approaching of an impossible 'blind sincerity' that heals? His risk taking is still intact and there is a supportive sociality created from a 'generalised recognition of precariousness' that Judith Butler suggests makes the senses more receptive. Our own vulnerabilities travel towards these sounds so as not to repress our emotional precarity, have it elided by a too tight identification, but to have it as a key part of our receptivity to the music. We are being held by sound.

Compositional Improvising

Ornette Coleman was not alone in overcoming oxymorons. Whether this aim of his to play 'improvised compositions' is a matter of an unwieldy language that doesn't quite articulate his experiential practice or an expressive practice that dismantles language by means of a 'telling inarticulacy' could be a continuing point of debate. But, for me, this compositional improvising is representative of a defiance of the logic of language on the part of musical practitioners. How can these words fit together and make sense!? Is it, then, an indicator of 'freedom' in music to be able to escape the confines of a language enforced logic and address affect instead? Did the use of notation in jazz represent a compromise between the two extremes of free-form and staved? Was notation a mediator that gave these internally exiled jazz musicians a sense of respectability? Did it assuage the sorrow in Eric Dolphy's voice? Or is it something much more simple. Richard Muhal Abrams, a founder member of the still-extant Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and active proponent of this liminal zone of compositional improvising, has said '... basically musicians are performers, composers and all, at the same time. You write music when you stand up and practice your instrument.'

For Abrams, composition seems to be something that musicians are instinct with, a form-making immanence, but it is also a co-operative and collective practice, a relational proximity of singularities. Following on from this what we have, then, is a further defiance of a language that can neither fully articulate collectivities (the personal pronoun) nor the 'all at the same time' of simultaneities (too tense restricted). That the AACM, like Sun Ra, resuscitated the ensemble sound of the big band is, with hindsight, a step forward into a remaking of the work of the past. Here, after be-bop's softening up of the song, there was room for simultaneous collectivities that were a little out of time. Abrams, in an interview with Ted Panken in 2007, cites Ellington and Fletcher Henderson as his early guiding lights in composition (a black compositional tradition that would go back to a pre-jazz New Orleans and one that is overlooked as soon as the word 'notation' is mentioned). The jazz approach to composition is tellingly different. As Graham Lock informs us: 'Ellington composed solos that sound not only like improvisations but like improvisations characteristic of specific players.' A kind of composed singularity effecting a non-classical form of jazz composition. So, if we take Ellington's bands we not only hear a well-oiled collective as insistent as history will be, but we also hear ensemble tones backing soloists and soloists soloing in unison. The sound of a future mode of organisation. We hear dance numbers, but also the onset of mood pieces like 'The Mooche' (1928) that struggle free of

the form of the blues into something multicoloured and drenched in whatever-polyphony.

Abrams and the AACM took their cue from this autodidact jazz route of the big bands and in the mid 60s, as free jazz took a hold, they worked on a more measured and spacious sound that allowed, in the manner of 'The Mooche', for a tonal palette to be created by, at times, unusual instrumental combinations. As Abrams told Panken, 'sound precedes music itself' and it is the freeing of sound from a metered tempo and the need to interpret standards that marks not just the AACM but the Arkestra too. Abram's piece 'Levels And Degrees of Light' pits a choral singer with vibes, brushed cymbals and clarinet to make an, at times, indistinct wave-like piece reminiscent of something much more akin to an avant-garde chamber orchestra. But, in not eschewing the dirty timbres of free jazz, their's is a punk classical that establishes a tension point between the more classically derived avant-garde musics of the '60s and this organic experimentation that took its off-centre approach into the jazz clubs of Chicago's South Side. Indeed, lacking the university backing of the former, the AACM (a musician-led self-institution that sought the creative and representational control of their music as well as an alternative pedagogy) was entirely financed by its membership to the degree that Val Wilmer says, perhaps over-effusively, that the AACM 'engendered the idea of musical socialism'.

One of the most widely appraised of the AACMs records is Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* (1966). This record prompted jazz writer John Litweiler to declare 'Music is the tension of sounds in the free space of silence'. His is an apt description of a title track that is as unexpected as it is form-forming (here we can hear an antecedent of such contemporary players as Taku Unami, Mattin and Radu Malfatti who have made pieces that are almost entirely filled with the 'free space of silence'). On 'Sound' the musicians play their instruments in unconventional ways, puncturing the half silence with slides and slips of merging tones that range from a historically informed articulacy to a 'telling inarticulacy': the ghost of blues and be-bop slide up to breath flatulence, spit, keys and blats, rasping flies, hi-hat shakes, arco cackle etc. There is, then, a dramatic element that doesn't so much unfold towards crescendo as hover immanently over the piece which makes the listener expectant and highly receptive to the range of expression on offer. The vulnerability of the unconventional playing as well as the fragility of incorporating silence and 'inarticulate' proto-expression, receives its support in the players' mutual risk taking: wines, moans, whimpers, rumblings. There are no virtuoso solos to speak of but a kind of gut bucket turn taking. This backs up George E. Lewis' statement about AACM music that 'individual style is radically devalued in favour of a collective conception that foregrounds form, space and sonic multiplicity'. Such a multiplicity is furthered by Mitchell's introduction of 'little instruments' (chains, whistles, bells etc.) that would otherwise be inaudible but whose use also adds a kind of humility to the piece: the little sounds get to be heard as an inclusion of the voiceless as well as being an indication that music is beginning again from an enticing degree zero. So, was 'Sound' scored? Was it notated? Was it mapped? I don't think so, for as Mitchell's later group, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, seem to demonstrate, such compositional improvising comes about by means of 'affinity dynamics' (Anthony Braxton). All the players were members of the AACM, each was composing themselves and the resultant collective practice overcomes the oxymorons! The rift between theory (notation) and practice (improvising) is not only overcome, but both notation and improvising are practised and heard in a light that casts doubt on either term's coherence. With music we need not be the slaves of language....

Tellingly Inarticulate (1)

When Mark E. Smith semi-sang 'Let's get this thing together, let's get this thing together... and make it... bad' and when Sun Ra spoke of there being no mistakes, that 'if someone's playing off key... the rest of us will do the same' we're not only in the terrain of an affinity dynamic that permits the impermissible and defies expectation whilst creating collective bonds, we are in the presence of what poet Nathaniel Mackey called 'telling inarticulacy'. There have been many terms for this: dirty timbre, dirt music, freak playing, skiffle, punk, messthetics, noise etc. So when Mackey speaks of the way that some jazz playing conveys a sense of 'apprehension and self-conscious duress by way of dislocated phrasings in which virtuosity mimes its opposite' we are in an area where music assumes an acutely political mantle. Militating against expected industry standards of production (the Fall's *Dragnet* as well as the Slits' *Y* album spring to mind) as well as against an alleged musical coherence that befits those automated by a common sense consciousness, this approach to non-virtuosity and 'making it bad' is a direct affront to notions of specialisation and commodification that not only restrict our confidence to participate but dull our senses. The self-same creates a lull and a dulling of the senses that can be awoken by the sudden shocks of an off-note or a staggered, stuttering rhythm. There's something enchanting about Sun Ra's percussive tracks on *Atlantis* that sound, to too trained ears, like a bunch of kids randomly banging stuff in a room. Or, the way King Oliver, a lot less smooth than Louis Armstrong, suddenly seems to have stuffed some broken glass down his trumpet. Such a reference to the beginnings of jazz is not without relevance as 'telling inarticulacy' is there at the root of it all: sandpaper used on a snare drum before brushes were invented, the intrusion of the saxophone into the New Orleans combos as if it were an alien instrument. This inarticulacy not only seems to respond both to the 'non tempered psyche' and to an emotional polyphony by means of its putting strict meaning into abeyance and addressing the affective, but it also seems to place us in the presence of a coming-to-articulation; something that could be prior to commodification. This latter, because it is a result of an 'affinity dynamics' that legitimates it, carries a sense of meaning as being made in the collective moment. So, 'telling inarticulacy' is a constant reminder that our creative powers need not be alienated by some debilitating version of virtuosity and, in that there is always a guaranteed audience for telling inarticulacy in the fellow musicians, that these creative powers have a constitutive force that's based in shared precarity...

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Ensemble Players

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