The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

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Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present "musicians in their own words".

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George E. Lewis
American trombonist, computer programmer & composer
(July14, 1952–)

Association of the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)

Internationally renowned for unparalleled contributions to modern music, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Inc. (AACM) has been an inspirational leader within the cultural community since 1965. A non-profit organization chartered by the State of Illinois , the AACM is a collective of musicians and composers dedicated to nurturing, performing, and recording serious, original music. This collective of dynamic and visionary artists formed the AACM to meet their emergent needs to expose and showcase their original compositions and to create an outlet for the development and performance of their music.

The AACM currently still exists. It has a web presence at http://aacmchicago.org/ .

George Lewis participated in the AACM. He wrote a book about it "A Power Stronger Than Itself: The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians", University of Chicago Press, 2008.

In some of the quotes below, Lewis refers to the AACM.

Lewis on Learning About Improvisation

LP: Did the improvisation of this period provide you with a sense of release, say in a gospel sense?

Lewis: My first experience with any of that music was on recordings. We were listening to them in high school. I remember being very baffled by "Ascension." I just couldn't figure it out. But then a simpler music came my way. That was the second Coltrane "Village Vanguard" record, which I could understand more easily (laughs). But I don't think even that was able to prepare me for people like Fred Anderson or the Art Ensemble of Chicago. I was a little bit nonplussed. I wasn't quite sure what I should do. Maybe I even fainted, listening to it. So if that could be called a form of release, so be it.

My period of greatest learning about this music was being a participant rather than being a listener first and then thinking, wow, I'd like to do this. Taking part in it helped me to understand it. I still remember the power of it, that energy, kind of hitting me at a certain point. And it may be that the experiences of the people who are listening to it and the people who are doing it are similar, but diverge at certain points.

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on Elitism

LP: Did the members of the AACM feel as if their awareness level was unique?

Lewis: I think that anytime that a group of people comes together around a set of goals that they all share, they develop a group concept of themselves. I think [AACM] people took pains to not separate themselves from "the masses," so-called ordinary people. That would have really defeated the purpose, to create a new elite around a group of issues that no one could understand but them. That was more what people heard about bebop--you know, the glasses and the in-group talk. I'm not sure how much of that was reflective of an elite stance, as it's been portrayed.

I think that people were really trying to do a music that reflected their own experience. And in the end, when you look at the audiences that came to this music, they were extremely diverse, so that meant that the interaction between audiences and the musicians also produced more diversity, produced more points of view. So that kind of kept a check on the building of an elite consensus that was disconnected from what was going on outside.

You are also talking about the idea of somehow considering yourself to be a child of destiny, and I think that there was probably a little bit of that. But there really was no real, objective reason for that. It was just what people were encouraged to believe in what they were doing. It was that belief that was the sustaining force, and that's what is meant by creating an atmosphere--an atmosphere in which possibilities could be imagined and beliefs could be sustained and nurtured.

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on the Continued Relevance of AACM

Lewis: I think there is a stronger message there, and I think the message has to do with the possibilities for mobility and diversity that the music symbolizes. I think people got that from it, and I think there's still a place for that.

The idea that we don't know what it's going to be is critical. If we know what it's going to be, maybe we shouldn't even bother doing it, because in a way, we've already done it. This sense of surprise and portent to the music seemed to be important as an experience, even prior to hearing a note. It's just the expectation level, that now, these people have come here to present us with something that they don't think we've heard before. That's what we're coming to get, to perform this mind melt with this other part of the community which is trying to present us with these ideas that they feel are new.

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on Creativity

Lewis: But this is where I begin to depart from the anti-essentialists. I feel that there is an essence of creativity that is a human birthright that doesn't go away, and that we are all basically born with. It's not just the province of a few super-people. I feel that when people are listening to music, they can do it because of the sense of empathy that allows them to respond to the creativity of other people by feeling their own creativity. In other words, those neurons start firing and those experiences, those bodily feelings, start to resonate with the creativity that's coming from outside, because they've got it within them.

The challenge is for more and more people to recognize the importance of that birthright. It's different from saying that everyone is an artist, because there are lots of people who are not artists who are creative, and creativity is not just one tiny thing. But you don't want to commodify it to be the province of an official artist who gets written about in newspapers and all of that. We want to be able to recognize the ubiquity of creativity as a means of recognizing its crucial nature to our experience as human beings on this planet, and maybe on the next planet (laughs).

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on Opposition between Success and Cultural Criticism

Lewis: I'm trying to avoid the glib statement of universal peace. It's easy to say those things when you are sitting in the belly of the beast, the world's largest, and arguably most rapacious imperialist power, and you have this big job as tenured holder of an endowed chair within that institution. You're differentially enabled and disabled, and you are implicated perhaps in some fairly major crimes, to coincide with some of the successes that you might have personally achieved.

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on Collective Improvisation

Lewis: If I may be permitted a speculation, Malachi and Lester were two of the major proponents of the idea that the AACM and the Art Ensemble were best thought of being collective. So, at great cost to their own possibilities, perhaps, they held that collective up as being of equal status with any stardom that they might have been able to achieve. They saw larger value systems there that the Art Ensemble could exemplify. That's what I learned from their work. They were incredibly nurturing to young people like me, and very welcoming. You know, I miss these guys. They helped me to find out who I was as a person, and they indulged all of my youthful arrogance. Artists shouldn't expect that; you're being a jerk and they just take it in stride--"Maybe he'll grow out of it."

George E. Lewis, interview with Lloyd Peterson, from "Music and the Creative Spirit", 2006.

Lewis on Voyager

TH: How did you get involved with making your own systems?

Lewis: There was a community that developed in the mid- to late-'70s surrounding computer music, an itinerant kind of community….I thought, "This sounds like people improvising. I think I should try to do this." It was great. I went home and got one of these things, and tried to learn. And there was a community available, so you could ask people for advice and assistance.

The goal was always to make some sort of improvising program; I wasn't particularly invested in any other way of doing things at the time. Maybe I've sort of expanded my horizons since then, but it was good to do this because it called upon a lot of intellectual faculties as well, thinking about what it meant to be a person improvising, what real-time activity meant. The more you learn about what people believe they're interested in, what they think they're hearing, or what they think they're communicating while in the process of making something improvised—at some point, it became pretty clear that was pretty much what people were doing in their every day life, whether they were walking across the street, or deciding what to eat in the morning, or whatever. There wasn't a lot of difference between that and what they were doing on the stage; they were drawing upon the same faculties, having the same problems, and the same opportunities for learning. Any life experience was somehow grist for the improvisation mill.

So there was this sort of radical art-life blending that went on being technologically mediated. Maybe you could also think about ways of approaching this without the computer, but somehow the computer made it that much more evident—you were able to create an avatar that represented something different from yourself, that you somehow had to communicate and negotiate with. There were two different modes of experience, the programming experience and the performing experience. And, of course, you didn't have to be the only one performing; other people were performing, too. And you were creating a group of people who were thinking hard about what it meant to do what they were doing. And that's what I always wanted: music as a space for reflection on the human condition.

George E. Lewis, interview with Trevor Hunter, from newmusicbox.com, 2010.

Lewis on Criteria for Improvisation

George E. Lewis, CTM 2018: Why Do We Want Our Computers to Improvise?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDP8FsjyCaA