

# The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

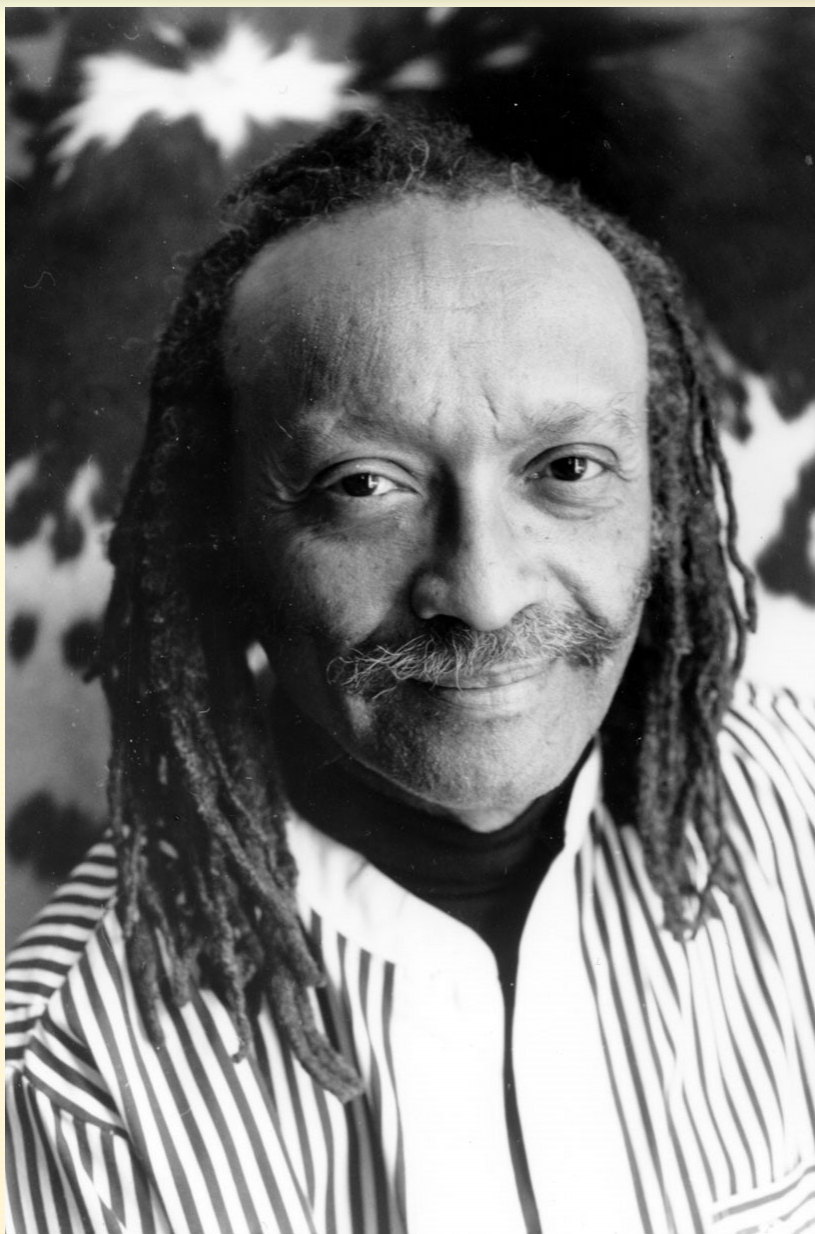
FYS 129

David Keffer, Professor  
Dept. of Materials Science & Engineering  
The University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, TN 37996-2100  
dkeffer@utk.edu  
<http://clausius.engr.utk.edu/>

## 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”.



# Cecil Taylor

American pianist  
(March 25, 1929--April 5, 2018)

## Taylor on a Compulsion to Create and Express Art

**Funkhouser:** It's inside your body, something that enters your body, then . . .

**Taylor:** A spirit! That force, you know--I realize that my mother had that force. But what she decided not to do with it--and if you have that force and you don't use it, then you die. Because if you kill that force your body follows afterwards. My uncle, her only brother, he could live in the house with us as long as he would not be a musician. And he died of cancer at the age of thirty-four. He gave me drum lessons.

Cecil Taylor, interview by Chris Funkhouser, Sept 3, 1994, published in *Hambone* #12.

## Taylor on Doing What You Want To Do

I think what my mother did give me unquestionably was that--maybe she didn't quite perceive it this way but--it is wonderful to be able to enjoy what it is I do now as opposed to the disciplinary aura that I had to grow up under. Now I do what I want to do because I love doing it, and it rewards me and I've been fortunate in that I've been told that other people have gotten something from what it is. It is possible to do what it is you decide you want to do with your life. For me that has been the thing that has cured whatever despondency, whatever anger, you know...well, that's that.

Cecil Taylor, interview by Chris Funkhouser, Sept 3, 1994, published in *Hambone* #12.

## Taylor on Washing Socks

Listening to music, I have to do things. I have things, like I love to wash socks, cause I love warm water on my fingers. If I really feel pissed about something, then I'll wash clothes. So, I learn from what's happening in music by keeping busy doing something else. Until, of course, my turn to do the music--and then I've discovered what I've learned. But that is also related to when I was really attempting to be a social person. Which meant I was going to—it hasn't been that long ago--going to bars with a lot of different people, and then somebody would say something that would make me very angry, and a day and a half later, when I'm practicing then I'd understand what made me angry about it, and what there was to do about it.

Cecil Taylor, interview by Chris Funkhouser, Sept 3, 1994, published in *Hambone* #12.



## Taylor on his Early Working Experience

My working experience began at a place called Club Harlem,” he says. “And the piano had seven keys that didn’t work. You started at 9, took 15 minutes off each hour, worked until 4 a.m., and got \$7. I also played at the Apollo Bar with a very tall alto player. We used to groove on ‘Dark Eyes.’ I would gig on Friday and Saturday, and I recall walking in there one night, and the bartender saying, ‘Oh shit. It’s going to be a weird weekend.’”

Cecil Taylor, interview by Patrick Ambrose, 2007 published in The Morning News.

## Taylor on his Debut Album, Jazz Advance

Take Jazz Advance, his 1956 debut album, as an example. At the time it was released, nothing even remotely similar existed. Constellations of dissonant chords frame Taylor's iconoclastic phrasing—an integration of the rhythm and melody that renders them indistinguishable from one another. When I bring up Jazz Advance, Taylor bursts into laughter.

“When I listen to Jazz Advance, I understand why it was an anathema to many musicians and to the academy that was in vogue at the time,” he says. “And I also understand why I like it. You know, one doesn't decide to become a musician. The forces of nature decide that for you. You don't have any choice in the matter and once you make a commitment to music, everything else that you do affects your playing.”

Cecil Taylor, interview by Patrick Ambrose, 2007 published in The Morning News.



## Taylor on the Origin of Meaning

...the fact remains that if you want to be a great artist, if you want to be a mature artist, that doesn't happen from those cards when you're 16, 15, 20, it happens maybe when you're 38 or 39 if you keep working. I'm really not talking about reviews in a sense, or peoples' reaction, I'm talking about what a musician knows from his own most private investigation of the facets of his life that have determined the amount of energy and devotion that he puts into his own self divination through playing and loving and experiencing whatever poetic thing he's doing. That has nothing to do with audience reception or what anybody says. It has to do finally with what is most meaningful to the person who is doing the creating.

Cecil Taylor, interview by Bill Smith, 1974, published in CODA.

## An Anecdote

Of the many stories about Taylor's adventures, the one I've always found most revealing—and I am assured by a close Taylor associate that it is not apocryphal—is his seduction of a man who came to burglarize his home in Brooklyn. The burglar became his lover and moved in for several months. This strikes me as a perfect allegory for Taylor's music, which dramatizes the conquest of danger, the porous line between power and vulnerability, fear and desire, terror and seduction. (These are, of course, qualities that Romantic philosophers associated with "the sublime," and Taylor was one of the last Romantics.) Taylor's music is beautiful, but its beauty is daunting, even frightening, and therefore less assimilable than Coleman's, or even the late, cacophonous work of John Coltrane.

Adam Shatz, *The New York Review of Books*, May 16, 2018.