

FYS 129: The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

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Quiz

Question 1. Based on what you heard in your listening assignment, assign one quote to George Lewis and one quote to John Zorn.

(A)

Yeah, well, that's what it takes— courage. It takes more courage than most people have. There's less than one percent of people like that, but the world could not exist without them. The world would not move forward without them, and I really believe that. I think the outsiders, the individualists, the people who have a messianic belief in themselves and are able to stick with their vision despite all odds—and believe me, Bill, every day of my life I'm haunted and tormented by the voices of people that are saying in my ear, "Maybe you're wrong." But the people that can stick with that, they're the ones that are really going to make a difference in the world. And they will always be a small number and I've always aspired to be one of that number.

(B)

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).

Question 2.

In the 1960's the Association of the Advancement of Creative Musicians was founded to showcase the talents of African American musicians performing outside the stereotypical musical idioms to which they were otherwise confined. In his book, A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music (University Of Chicago Press, 2009), George Lewis, an AACM member, a trombonist, composer, MacArthur fellowship recipient and Columbia Professor of Music, meticulously notes that such an organization was necessary because the culture of the time did not allow for black Americans to express themselves outside their assigned roles. Federal grants did not provide equitable funding for black Americans practicing outside the jazz idiom. There were jazz programs and classical programs that were segregated by race and that provided different sized grants, with significantly larger grants distributed to white classical composers. Similarly private venues and music festivals had no interest in black music outside jazz.

For those of us who were not alive during the 1960's, that decades seems like ancient history, corresponding to an age before the civil rights movement, an age in which race-based policies still explicitly and implicitly ruled the day.

In an effort to understand to what extent these policies continue today, let us consider an annual music festival that takes place in our own fair city of Knoxville, Tennessee. The Big Ears festival promotes itself in the following way:

“The Big Ears Festival brings together musicians and artists who span generations and transcend genres for dozens of concerts along with installations, exhibitions, film screenings, interactive workshops, informative talks, surprise collaborations, and unexpected connections.”

On the website promoting the 2014 version of this festival, a link was provided for each artist, group or ensemble performing during the festival. 25 links were provided, corresponding to 40 individual musicians.

Fill out the table below with what your best guess for the racial and gender composition of the musicians invited to participate in a forward-thinking festival, like Big Ears. The total should sum to 40 musicians.

Male	
White	
African American	
Asian	
Female	
White	
African American	
Asian	

Quiz Answer Key:

Question 1.

- (A) John Zorn
- (B) George Lewis

Question 2.

From the line-up that appeared on the Big Ears Festival Line-up website, there were 25 links that lead to 40 unique musicians. Of these 40 musicians, there is the following demographic breakdown

34 White Men

1 Black Man - Laraaji

1 Asian Man – Keiji Haino of Nazoranai

4 White Women – Susanna, Julia Holter, Britta & Lauren Radnofsky of Ensemble Signal

0 Black Women

0 Asian Women

What the line-up of the Big Ears Festival appears to indicate is that the prevailing myth that African Americans have little to contribute to experimental music is still being perpetuated in the year 2014 by festivals such as this one, which present to the public a vision of creative music that almost completely excludes people of color.