**Free Jazz**

Keith Waters

Free Jazz emerged in the late 1950s out of the ongoing negotiation of the American jazz tradition. By mid-twentieth century, this African-American musical tradition had developed into an array of styles variously linked to New Orleans (Dixieland) or Chicago School (1920s), swing (1930s), and bebop (1940s). If swing embodied an industrialized modern evolution of New Orleans-style jazz (deemed traditional), Bebop brought the modernist ethos to jazz by attacking what some critics suggested swing was becoming: too popular, too banal and uniform. Consequently, bebop—through innovators such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker—disrupted the unifying structures of big band swing while complicating the musical elements of rhythm, harmony, and melody. Free Jazz formed from the contours of bebop’s own progeny, the styles associated with hard bop, Cool Jazz, and Third Stream. The primary innovators of Free Jazz all came from the cutting edge of 1950s hard bop (and sometimes rhythm and blues), but were also influenced by the modernist, avant-garde strains in classical music in the 1940s and 1950s (which also found expression in the musical arrangements in Third Stream and Cool Jazz). Free Jazz musicians attempted to break from the confines of Western musical tenets (European tonal harmonic theory) and the composer (the notated score that characterized jazz compositions through bebop) while renewing the collective improvisation of New Orleans-style jazz through spontaneous interaction within a group. Free Jazz musicians placed a renewed emphasis on spontaneously improvised melodies and unfixed rhythms.

Though isolated precedents existed in the late forties for free improvisation from Cool Jazz pianist Lennie Tristano (an influence on Cecil Tayor), Free Jazz as a diverse movement did not emerge until the late-1950s. Artists such as Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor began pushing their music beyond the jazz tradition with a series of LPs beginning in 1956 with Taylor’s *Jazz Advance* and Coleman’s *Something Else!!!!: The Music of Ornette Coleman* from 1958. As the dawn of the 1960s approached, Taylor and Coleman—along with the work of Albert Ayler, Sonny Murray, Archie Shepp, and John Coltrane (all of whom played with Taylor at some point), among others—laid out an approach to jazz that dismissed the harmonic rules of chords and instead relied on a continuously improvised melody produced in the moment of playing. Irregular meters or tempo augmented this approach, sometimes resulting in the loss of “swing,” one of the defining characteristics of jazz from its inception. It is the loss of the latter component of jazz that drew the ire of critics. Not all Free Jazz released the role of “swing” from their repertoire, however. Instead, most artists merely sought an expanded musical palette not weighted down by tradition, as some artists such as Archie Shepp and members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago unitized a broad range of older jazz forms—from New Orleans style to Swing. Alongside freer aesthetics, a diversity of color as added through the use of unorthodox (for jazz) instruments, including African, Middle Eastern, and Indian instruments. The sound produced often gave Free Jazz a “world music” quality as heard in the work of Ornette Coleman, Pharaoh Sanders, Alice Coltrane, and Don Cherry—with album titles such as *Karma* and *Ptah, The El Daoud*. Moreover, a move away from the perfection of tone that characterized the virtuosity of bebop and its manifestations in the 1950s led to an unorthodox treatment of timbre, generally through the use of rough-sounding playing techniques such as shrieks and overblowing aimed toward creating overtones and the sounds of human voices within the collective expression—with John Coltrane and Albert Ayler particular innovators.

Concurrent with the flowering of Free Jazz in the 1960s was other culture indicators that also criticized the modernism. Although pre-war modernism sought to reconcile the dehumanizing affects of modernity with an admiration of technology—to create a modern sense of normalcy amidst industrial upheaval—modernism became de-politicized after World War II. Indeed, in the West, especially the U.S., modernism became a part of the cultural and political establishment as a Cold War weapon—with the State Department sending out jazz ensembles to play in Africa and Asia. Free Jazz challenged these new precepts of modernism through the embrace of the emerging Black Power movement, associated with the Civil Rights struggle in the U.S. and the decolonization movements in Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, Free Jazz anticipated the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in 1963, which, in turn, politicized Free Jazz aesthetics even further through poems and essays as an explicit connection to the African roots of black American music. This break, moreover, influenced the naming of the music by some as “New Black Music” rather than previous labels such as the New Thing or avant-garde jazz—or even the genre-establishing album and genre-namesake: Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1960). The overtly racialization of the music, moreover, provoked a response from the jazz establishment that sought an apolitical jazz—or, in light of its use as a Cold War instrument, a politics uncritical of the West. As early as 1961, jazz critic John Tynan coined the phrase “anti-jazz” to characterize this emerging music. As the jazz world polarized (in line with the broader U.S. society) in the mid-1960s, the presence of Free Jazz could arguably be said to have resurrected the insurgent nature of Peter Bürger’s “historical avant-garde.” Indeed, the response to Coleman’s work in the 1960s led some in the jazz establishment to label him an anarchist in light of his dismissal of Western musical tenets. For many, Free Jazz became noise rather than music, as it deconstructed the codes and values of Western musical tenets. With these relationship values set in a state of crisis, Free Jazz became a threatening act rather than an aural complement to the dominant set of codes—as hard bop had become.

Consequently, modernism and its relationship to Free Jazz is antagonistic not just on the level of aesthetics aimed toward the disruption of Western musical tenets. In terms of modernism’s relationship to Eurocentricity, imperialism, and slavery, Free Jazz’s connection to blackness—and its often explicitly stated relationship to African music—underlines a point Paul Gilroy suggests in his work on the Black Atlantic. As a music born out of enslavement in the New World, Free Jazz’s escape from the confines that continued to form the boundaries of the possible for jazz music through the post-bebop years underlines the ideological upheaval the genre commands—and explains the often voracious response of some jazz critics (predominantly white) in the 1960s to Free Jazz. An acknowledgement of these centuries-long dynamics often found blunt expression. For example, in a 1966 article entitled, “Shepp Jazz Blends Modernity, Malice,” critic Leonard Feather noted: “Music of this kind is extremely difficult for many listeners to empathize with. One distinguished [classical music] composer in the audience commented, ‘Having to listen to this is our punishment for what we have done to the Negroes.’” In the same year, Ayler underlined what was at stake in this afterlife of cultural and ideological confinement of African American expression through jazz music: “I’ve lived more than I can express in [hard bop] terms. Why should I hold back the feeling of my life, of being raised in the ghetto of America? It’s a new truth now. And there have to be new ways of expressing that truth.” In terms of situating Free Jazz and modernism, the conflict between the two poles of freely spontaneous improvisation beyond Western musical tenets, between musicians predominantly of African descent and critics predominantly of European descent, between a critical discourse arguing over aesthetic quality—all of these processes exposed the very machinations buttressing the ideas of modernism and its search for eternal truths.

Para textual material (audio/video)

Discography

Abrams, Muhal Richard. *Levels and Degrees of Light*. Delmark, 1967, 1991. Compact disc DD-413.

Art Ensemble of Chicago. *A Jackson in Your House/Message to Our Folks*. BYG/Actuel, 1969; reissue, Charly, 2001. Compact disc SNAP 066 CD.

---. *Les Stances a Sophie*. Universal Sound, 2004. Compact disc B00004Y1YH.

Ayler, Albert. *Albert Ayler in Greenwich Village*. Impulse! 1966. LP AS-9155.

Bob James Trio. *Explosions*. ESP-DISK, 1965. LP ESP-DISK 1009.

Cherry, Don. *“Mu” First Part/”Mu” Second Part*. BYG/Actuel, 1969; reissue, Fuel 2000. Compact disc 302 061 147 2.

Coleman, Ornette. *Change of the Century*. Atlantic, 1959. Compact disc 7 81341-2.

---. *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by theOrnette Coleman Double Quartet*. Atlantic, 1961; reissue, Rhino, 1998. Compact disc R2 75208.

---. *The Music of Ornette Coleman: Something Else*. Contemporary, 1958. Compact disc OJCCD-163-2.

---. *The Complete Science Fiction Sessions*. Columbia, 2000. Compact disc C2K 63569.

---. *The Ornette Coleman Trio at the “Golden Circle” Stockholm*. Blue Note Records, 1966, 2002.

---. *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Atlantic, 1959. Compact disc 1317-2.

Coltrane, Alice. *Ptah, The El Daoud*. Impulse! 1970, 1996. Compact disc IMPD-201.

---. *Journey in Satchidananda*. Impulse! 1970, 1997. Compact disc IMPD-228.

---. *Universal Consciousness*. Impulse! 1971, 2002. Compact disc AS-9210.

Coltrane, John and Archie Sheep. *New Thing At Newport*. Impulse! 1965. Compact disc 314 543 414-2.

Coltrane, John. *Coltranetime*. Blue Note, 1962. Compact disc CDP 7 84461 2.

---. *Meditations*. Impulse! 1966, 1996. Compact disc IMPD-199.

*Jazzactuel: A Collection of Avant Garde/Free Jazz/Psychedelia from the BYG/Actuel catalogue of 1969-1971*. Charly, 2001. Compact disc SNAJ 707 CD.

Murray, Sonny. *Sonny’s Time Now*. Jihad Records, 1965; reissue, DIW Records (import), 1965. Compact disc DIW-355.

*New York Art Quartet*. ESP-DISK, 1964. Compact disc 1004.

*New York Eye and Ear Control*. ESP-DISK, 1964. Compact disc ESP1016.

Sanders, Pharoah. *Karma*. Impulse! 1969. Compact disc IMPD-153.

---, Pharoah. *Tauhid*. Impulse! 1967, 1993. Compact disc GRP-129.

---, Pharoah. *Thembi*. Impulse! 1971, 1998. Compact disc IMPD-253.

Sharrock, Sonny. *Black Woman*. Vortex, 1969. LP 2014.

---. *Monkey–Pookie–Boo*. Actuel/BYG, 1970; reissue, Sunspots, 2002. Compact disc SPOT 504.

Shepp, Archie. *Attica Blues*. Impulse! 1972. Compact disc AS-9222.

---. *Blasé/Live at the Pan-African Festival*. BYG/Actuel, 1969; reissue, Fuel 2000, 2001. Compact disc 302 061 152 2.

---*. Fire Music*.Impulse, 1965. Compact disc IMPD-158.

---. *Four for Trane*. Impulse! 1964, 1997. Compact disc IMPD-218.

---. *Mama Too Tight*. Impulse! 1966; reissue 1998. Compact disc IMPD-248.

---. *Yasmina, A Black Woman*/*Poem For Malcolm*. BYG/Actuel, 1969; reissue, Charly, 2003. Compact disc SNAP 162 CD.

Simmons, Sonny. *Music From the Spheres*. ESP-DISK, 1966. Compact disc ESP1043.

Simone, Nina. *Nina Simone in Concert*. Philips, 1964. LP PHS-600-135.

Sun Ra. *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra*. ESP-Disk, 1965. Compact disc ESP1014.

Taylor, Cecil. *Stereo Drive*. United Artists, 1959. LP UAS-5014.

---. *Trance*. Black Lion, 1963, 1996. Compact disc BLCD 760220.

---. *Unit Structures*. Blue Note, 1966. Compact disc CDP 7 84237 2.

*The New Wave in Jazz*. Impulse! 1965, 1994. Compact disc GRD-137.

Tristano, Lennie and Wayne Marsh. *Intuition*. Capitol Jazz, 1996. Compact disc CDP 7243 8 52771 2 2.

Waters, Patty. *Sings*. ESP-DISK, 1966. LP ESP 1025.

References and further reading

Anderson, Iain. *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Backus, Rob. *Fire Music: A Political History of Jazz*. Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1976.

Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from it*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963.

Baraka, Amiri. *Black Music*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1968; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1998.

Baskerville, John D. *The Impact of Black Nationalist Ideology on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

Budds, Michael J. *Jazz in the Sixties: The Expansion of Musical Resources & Techniques*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1978.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Corbett, John. “Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation.” In *Jazz Among the Discourses.* Krin Gabbard, ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

Hersch, Charles. “’Let Freedom Ring!’: Free Jazz and African-American Politics.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (winter 1995-1996): 97-123.

Jost, Ekkehard. *Free Jazz*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1981.

Kofsky, Frank. *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s.* 2nd ed. New York: Pathfinder, 2000.

Lewis, George E. “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives.” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91-122.

Lewis, George E. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Litweiler, John. *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1984.

Radano, Ronald M. *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Rivelli, Pauline, and Robert Levin, eds. *Giants of Black Music*. New York: Da Capo, 1979.

Shipton, Alyn. *A New History of Jazz*. New York: Continuum, 2001.

Singal, Daniel Joseph. “Towards a Definition of American Modernism.” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987).

Spellman, A.B. *Four Jazz Lives*. New York: Pantheon, 1966. Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Such, David G. *Avant-Garde Jazz Musicians Performing ‘Out There’*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.

Szwed, John F. *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1998.

Thomas, Lorenzo. “Ascension: Music and the Black Arts Movement.” In *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Gabbard

Von Eschen, Penny M. *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Weinstein, Norman C. *A Night in Tunisia: Imaginings of Africa in Jazz*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1993.

Wilmer, Valerie. *As Serious as Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz*. Westport: L. Hill, 1980.