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| Free Jazz |
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| Free Jazz emerged in the late 1950s out of the ongoing negotiation of the American jazz tradition. By the 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 industrialised 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. The contours of bebop’s own progeny — the styles associated with hard bop, Cool Jazz, and Third Stream — gave form to Free Jazz. 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 dominance of the composer — the notated score that characterised 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. |
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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 dominance of the composer — the notated score that characterised 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 (1930--) and Cecil Taylor (1929--) began pushing their music beyond the jazz tradition in a series of LPs beginning with Taylor’s *Jazz Advance* (1956) and Coleman’s *Something Else!!!!: The Music of Ornette Coleman* (1958). As the 1960s approached, Taylor and Coleman — along with 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) unitised a broad range of older jazz forms, from New Orleans style to swing. Alongside freer aesthetics, a diversity of musical colour was added through the use of unorthodox instruments, including African, Middle Eastern, and Indian instruments. The sound thus produced often gave Free Jazz a ‘world music’ quality, as heard in the work of Ornette Coleman, Pharaoh Sanders (1940--), Alice Coltrane (1937-2007) and Don Cherry (1936-1995) — with album titles such as *Karma* (Sanders, 1969) and *Ptah, The El Daoud* (Alice Coltrane, 1970). Moreover, a move away from the perfection of tone that characterised 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, which were aimed toward creating overtones and the sounds of human voices within the collective expression. John Coltrane (1926-1967) and Albert Ayler were particular innovators.  Influenced by a number of cultural factors, Free Jazz evolved a critical relationship to the development of modernism in the 1960s. Although pre-war modernism sought to reconcile the dehumanising effects of modernity with an admiration of technology — to create a modern sense of normalcy amidst industrial upheaval — modernism arguably became de-politicised 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 decolonisation movements in Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, Free Jazz anticipated the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in 1963, which, in turn, politicised Free Jazz aesthetics even further through poems and essays that made 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 overt racialisation 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 characterise this emerging music. As the jazz world polarised (in line with the broader U.S. society) in the mid-1960s, the presence of Free Jazz could be argued 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 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’s relationship to Free Jazz is antagonistic, and 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 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 empathise 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, funnelled through a critical discourse argued in terms of aesthetic quality — all of these processes exposed the very machinations buttressing the ideas of modernism and its search for eternal truths. 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.  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| Further reading:  (Rivelli and Levin)  (Anderson)  (Attali)  (Backus)  (Baraka, Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from It)  (Baraka, Black Music)  (Baskerville)  (Budds)  (Bürger)  (Corbett)  (Hersch)  (Jost)  (Kofsky)  (Lewis, Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives)  (Lewis, A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music)  (Litweiler)  (Radano)  (Shipton)  (Singal)  (Spellman)  (Such)  (Szwed)  (Thomas)  (Von Eschen)  (Weinstein)  (Wilmer) |