

Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde.
By Lloyd Peterson. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006. 333 pages.
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Improvisation is the one musical activity that confounds those musicians that do not improvise, yet compels those who do to challenge themselves technically, creatively, and emotionally. Historically, improvisation has been viewed as a criterion for determining a musician's prowess and ability to generate something new from pre-existing material or by simply "making it up." All of the great composers of past eras were skilled improvisers. From Bach and Mozart to Beethoven and Schumann, improvisation has long been held as a yardstick for determining musical skill. The cadenza, or solo improvised section of a concerto, gives the performer the opportunity to prove that he or she was indeed an accomplished player. By spinning out thematic material from the body of the composition, the performer can essentially create an entirely new section of music, one that is unique yet familiar as it is based on material previously heard. Improvisation is not limited to the classical world, however: jazz and blues musicians rely heavily on improvisation, and popular musicians play "solos" in pop, rock, and country songs.

Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde is the latest entry into the pantheon of books on jazz. Author Lloyd Peterson, contributor to *Downbeat* and *Earshot* magazines, has collected interviews, discussions, and opinions from well-known and not so well-known musicians in an attempt to explore and quantify various elements of improvisation. The book deals primarily

with musicians that play so-called creative music. Peterson "gathers together the broadest array of people involved in creative music and collects their words about process, their thinking, their world" (p. xi). He asserts that "this book is not about jazz and how it is defined and perceived by its many factions but in the importance of today's innovative ideas and vision as expressed by the artists through their own voices" (p. xvii).

Peterson's subjects are all accomplished and seasoned musicians that have clear thoughts and ideas on the skill of improvisation, and some even encroach on world politics. The interviews, which range from short, one page commentaries to more extensive conversations, add insight into an activity that can be difficult to explain. The diversity of the interviews is matched by the instruments the subjects play. All of the instruments commonly found in a jazz ensemble are represented. Peterson discusses creativity, rhythm, and time with drummers, guitarists, bass players, pianists, saxophonists, and vocalists. The book includes a comprehensive index and several pages of clear, black and white photographs of the interviewees.

Total freedom of improvisation, or improvising where there is no harmonic or rhythmic pattern to follow, has been typically called free jazz. This implies a freedom of tonality, form, style, timbre, rhythm, and melody that can rightly be labelled "improvised." But musicians that play this kind of music eschew the

label “free jazz” and prefer “creative music.” The feeling here is that “creative music” better describes the activity, even though many of the practitioners are thought of as jazz musicians. The style first emerged in the 1960s and was identified with the music of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and others. It was highly regarded by many critics but not widely accepted commercially. Peterson notes, “One could say that this book is a compendium of characteristics we may consider in thinking about jazz, improvised music, and culture.” (p. xi) He goes on to define creative music as “another term often used to describe new music involving improvisation. To me, it refers to those engaged in the search for a personal language.” (p. xi)

The danger of choosing a topic such as improvisation is that it is an activity that non-musicians would or could not understand. While most people do understand the concept of improvising, or even making up something musical on the spot, they would not identify with the cognitive processes that underpin the activity. Despite the esoteric nature of the topic, Peterson manages to keep the interviews on track. They never veer off into territory that would obfuscate the understanding of the non-musician reader. Any specific musical taxonomy is largely avoided; instead the subjects are asked questions such as, “What is creativity?” “Is there encouragement for artistic freedom today?” and “Is jazz a thing or an approach or process to making music?”

In addition, Peterson uses stock questions that he poses to a number of interviewees. For example, a quotation by Cecil Taylor provides added

substance to many of the interviews. Taylor states that music has to do with places which are magical instead of logical. Peterson spins this into a question that elicits responses that all essentially say the same thing. For many of the musicians asked, it was the “magical” place instead of the “logical” one that was the most desirable and this provided the genesis of the improvisational idea, feeling, or mindset. Saxophonist Mats Gustafsson notes, “There isn’t a real logic that I use, so I would say it’s all from that other place” (p. 39). Guitarist Bill Frisell states, “For me, music is kind of a magic thing. When it’s really happening, I’m trying to figure out what it is though I can’t really describe it” (p. 99). Fellow guitarist Pat Metheny says, “The “magic” factor, the qualities that are unquantifiable are the most interesting and least discussed when it comes to jazz” (p. 194). But, British musician Derek Bailey sits on the side of logic. When presented with the Taylor quotation, he alludes to his own creative process: “[T]he logic is very attractive to me. I like to look for logic in music in places where it’s not usually found” (p. 5).

The book is conversational, with all of the questions circling around the “hows” and “whys” of improvisation. The informality of much of the language creates an intimacy that draws the reader into the conversation. It is not full of dense musical language, theories, or terms that only a privileged few can understand. Moreover, this is not simply a collection of interviews: Peterson spotlights a roundtable discussion by five members of the Peter Brozmann Tentet who delve into topics of process, reception, delivery, criticism, and politics. Also, one of the more

interesting entries is a facsimile of a handwritten note by the late Steve Lacy. He offers what Peterson calls “one of the primary incentives” for the book. (p. 146) Lacy begins his letter with a not so subtle critique of analysis and classification, “Jazz is already hot music; it doesn’t want to be ‘grilled’. Analysis is like killing butterflies, so as to classify them in formaldehyde” (p. 147). Peterson qualifies Lacy’s comments, “His letter reflects his struggle, his passion, along with his frustration with those who tried and failed to describe what obviously meant so much” (p. 146). These entries, along with the other non-interviews, break up the book adding interest and additional perspective to an already fascinating topic.

Improvising can be a frightening experience for novice players; even trained musicians sometimes express a fear and fascination with the process. For a musician that relies on the printed score for pitch, rhythm, tempo, and dynamics, having to ostensibly create out of thin air, harmonic foundation notwithstanding, can be a curious and nerve-wracking experience. Improvisation is not something that every musician can do, yet when it is done well, it offers a window into the ephemeral. Good improvisers make the activity appear effortless, seeming to create musical ideas on the spot. Instant composing, if you will. Like other musical activities, it requires a good deal of practice, technical prowess, and

experience to improvise at a level that seems natural and unforced; in other words, not improvised. A musical illusion perhaps that speaks to that part of the musical and creative process that is universally sought after by all musicians, regardless of style, instrument, or genre.

Broaching a theme like improvisation can be difficult, for it is impossible to truly understand what takes place within a musician’s cognitive process. Peterson is able to glean the essence of this through carefully crafted questions that illuminate an activity that can be hard to describe. For teachers, the book would be an excellent resource to introduce the subject and perhaps help ease the fear of playing “without a net.” While the comments and observations presented are quite diverse, they all converge on the emotional level, and getting a novice musician to think emotionally about the music can be tricky. *Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde* adds insight to a musical activity that is many times overlooked, but arguably crucial to all music regardless of style, genre, or era. It captures moments in time that, like an improvisation, are lost once they are played.

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