

Jazz, in a way, has resurrected [the improvisational] process—which I call the “Jazz-Process”. Now, Jazz—as we tend to look at it—is a style, but I feel that Jazz is not so much a style as it is a process of making music. It's the process of making one minute's music in one minute's time. Whereas when you compose, you can make one minute's music and take three months to compose it...

... because of historical circumstances and where Jazz was born ... and the American culture ... we think of Jazz as a stylistic medium, which, in a way, it is ... but we must remember that, in an absolute sense, Jazz is more of a ... creative process of spontaneity than a style ...

Therefore, you might say that Chopin or Bach or Mozart or whoever improvised music — that is, anyone who was able to make music “of the moment”—was in a sense playing “Jazz” ...

One of the most thrilling things about Jazz, as a spontaneous creative process, is ... recording it and later hearing oneself and being so surprised at what has happened.

- Bill Evans, Jazz pianist (*The Universal Mind Of Bill Evans*, Rhapsody Films 1966)

Jazz is difficult to pin down. The question “what is jazz?” is still being asked today, almost a century after it became a musical phenomenon. While thinking of jazz qua jazz (i.e., not jazz as metaphor or jazz as way of life, or jazz as a model for socio-political discourse) there are three common elements: 1) jazz is essentially a rhythmic matter, a musical tradition with distinctly rhythmic goals; whatever sources jazz may use — and it will use any source — it takes them and bends them to its own rhythmic task; 2) while the European musical tradition capitalizes on the alternation between tension and relaxation, consonance and dissonance, and energy and repose, in jazz, tension and relaxation are perpetually bound together in a single structure; 3) though not alone in utilizing improvisation, jazz relies on improvisation in its spirit, composition and performance more than any other musical tradition.

Improvisation, as a definitional matter, has two main types. The first, in short, can be thought of as instant composition, or immediate composition, of an entire work by its performer as it is being performed. The second and less idealized form of improvisation is the elaboration or other variation in real time of a pre-existing framework. An improvised performance (which by definition is also an improvised composition) in this latter sense is one in which the properties, be they structural (e.g. melody, harmony or length) or expressive (e.g. tempo, vibrato or accentuation), are not completely determined by decisions made prior to the time of performance. Although some jazz musicians would like us to believe — and some jazz aficionados like themselves to believe — in instant composition / pure spontaneity, spontaneity is not an unbounded practice nor, in truth, an actionable one. The ideal of extemporaneous creation is always tempered by the reality of repetition, pre-conceptualization and control. Even the purest devotee of the greatest jazz improvisors — one immediately thinks Ornette Coleman and Charlie Parker — will be aware that the spontaneous improvisor's speed and fluency is not heedless, careless or lacking in coherent goals, and is not unaided by efficacious techniques. The jazz improvisor always balances “the moment” with a judicious use of a pre-existing aesthetic framework and pre-visualized artistic materials. The improvisor's mind is crammed full of motifs, instrumental sounds, tiny figures, large structures, scales, chords, modes and all of the rest of it from which he or she draws in creating works through association.

Preparation, practice and pre-conceptualization are absolute necessities — it is not false to say one can practice improvising — one can work up a cache of licks, figure out various ways around tricky progressions

and so on, to be employed both mindlessly (through the embodied hand) and mindfully with the engagement of both the conscious and unconscious. Against the vision of the jazz improviser as the medium through which a continuous flow of data associations, memories and meditations are translated into an artistic product, a reasonable view of the improvisatory process (Bill Evans's "Jazz-process") recognizes the primacy of planning, deliberation, pre-conceptualization and other constraints purposely employed. The constraints themselves are the *sine qua non* of improvisation, not external to it.

To embrace improvisation and the jazz tradition is to embrace an aesthetics of imperfection — to accept the materials at hand, and the hand that you are dealt, and to do something with them. Errors will creep in, not only in form but in execution; the improviser, if sincerely attempting to be creative, will push himself or herself into areas of creation that his or her technique will not be able to handle. The product (by definition, the process) will embody moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes, unfortunate surprises and aimless passages. Critics who are unaccepting of an improvisatory mindset accuse jazz of being harmonically uninventive and containing lots of wrong notes in both the sense of inappropriateness for the musical moment and poor execution. For a spectator who cannot accept the ethical dimension of improvisation, Miles Davis is a problem. How does that spectator account for the glaring defects in the performance of someone who is undisputedly one of the most important musicians in the history of jazz? How does one resolve the disequilibrium engendered by the innate understanding that an artist's failures and mistakes are coextensive with the art form's power?

Jazz is a discursive embrace of contingency. To be in the flow is to make on-the-spot responses to problems that are generated by the interaction of events, coupling the musician's sense of the rhythmic and harmonic possibilities with their individual capacities, their store of knowledge and their entire being. Flow is to be willing to make the moves — however risky, novel or clichéd — that are necessary and required in the face of unanticipated, perverse and even random occurrences (most of which are generated by the acts of oneself). To be in a groove is not just to resolve problems; it is also to seek them out. The product of the groove — its melodic line, with its impression of the push and pull and the generation and decay of tension and resolution — embody an "improvised feel" and have a distinctive and unreplicable form. Each performance is the concretization of the excitement and unpredictability of the process. Paradoxically, a process (a set of guidelines for activities within a given framework) which is infinitely replicable and which is engendered for the sake of repetition, creates a singularity — *this is it*; this is a singular occurrence that will never happen again.

In discussions of improvisation it is frequently noted that structure and form are neglected. But improvisors are uniquely concerned with structure, though the structure may be retrospective and, in part, unconscious. In the realm of cognitive sciences, this retrospective approach to structure has been poetically referred to as "laying down a path while walking." An improviser lays down a world; he or she does not mirror it. The improviser actively generates and maintains the structure and form of the work in the process of its own production. In laying down the path, the improviser experiences time in an inner-directed manner — the present (the next step) is heightened, though the past and future are not absent. An improviser creates while simultaneously projecting awareness into the past and future — in each step, past ideas are recalled and developed or future-directed strategies are implemented. When improvising, the present is twofold: one layer involves sequential causal relationships between events, and the other layer is autonomous and changeable from its adjacent temporal surroundings. In jazz the present is dynamic rather than a discreet parcel of time whose boundaries are continually definable and continually redefined by subjective criteria. Each instant is a horizon that bleeds into the past and present; retention and protension form a future and historical "halo" encircling a tension to the present moment — either way, time and temporal experience are marked by continuity and flow.

Though common sense dictates that music is a function of sound, music is more accurately thought of as an art of time. In the most prosaic and formal sense, tones (the building blocks of music) have duration and music is the unfolding of tones through time. If music is an art of time, jazz's time is right now — the ever present moment of improvisation.

Sadie Coles HQ is pleased to announce its third solo exhibition of artist Ryan Sullivan.