Misconceptions in Linking Free Jazz with the Civil Rights Movement: Some Dangers of Teaching Sociopolitical Context in Jazz History

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This article deals with two misunderstandings that intertwine to confuse students, teachers, and commentators of jazz history if they study American history at the same time that they study the music itself. The first misunderstanding is that during the 1960s African Americans striving for their political freedoms also transferred those strivings to originate musical approaches (subsequently termed "free-form" or "free jazz") in which freedoms were sought from adherence to fixed progressions of accompaniment chords and meter. The second misunderstanding is that angry sounding music was a direct result of avant-garde musicians in the 1960s using jazz as a tool of personal protest toward social injustices.

Cause-and-effect links have been made erroneously between socio-cultural context and the origination of jazz styles. This article demonstrates how free-form approaches in jazz had a long, musically motivated history before the widely publicized struggles for civil rights which some commentators thought were the stimulus for them. The history of free-form jazz is outlined and distinguished from its place in avant-garde jazz in the 1960s as a whole. Flawed tendencies of thinking are identified to account for illusory correlations: (a) confusing the effect of a sound with how it originated; (b) confusing journalists' perceptions with creators' intentions; (c) placing disproportionate emphasis on a minority of works in a given approach, a given era or given musician; and (d) seeking programmatic aspects in instrumental music that is not programmatic.

More than eight hundred colleges and universities offer courses in jazz history, introduction to jazz, and jazz appreciation. More than fifty different books are available as course texts. There is a tendency in some of these books to link sociopolitical issues with the *origination* of jazz styles. The writing suggests, implies, or directly asserts that a cause-and-effect relationship existed between politics and the development of new jazz styles when, almost without exception, certain political movements did not lead to the music's origination. In most cases, the politics merely happened at the same time as the jazz movements. Correlation did not equal causation.

The stimulus for this article was a senior thesis on jazz history that had earned an "A" at another college. The author sent me the thesis because she wanted me to concur on the depth of her work. The thesis was alarming, however, because it was both well referenced *and* filled with illusory correlations between sociopolitical issues and jazz innovations. It illustrated a problem I had mentioned thirty years ago about linking extra-musical factors and jazz appreciation.[1] The appearance of this thesis caused concern about the extent to which such misinterpretations were altering the learning

[1]Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles* (Prentice-Hall, 1978), 336.

process of bright students who have no reason to doubt that their references are accurate, balanced accounts of jazz history.

A main reference source in this thesis was the Ken Burns *JAZZ* television series, which is pervaded with politics, social history, and implications that sociopolitical issues were the catalyst for jazz styles. The student's dependence on it was not atypical. More and more jazz history instructors have been requiring it and/or its companion volume *Jazz: A History of America's Music* by Geoffrey C. Ward[2] and other books with a similar focus. One of the errors that these sources catalyzed in the senior's thesis was that African Americans seeking their civil rights had sought musical freedoms *because* of their struggle for sociopolitical freedoms. The student concluded that the civil rights movement had *led* to approaches in which jazz improvisers abandoned preset chord progressions. She had done this, in part, because the Burns series had covered such "free jazz" *at the same time as* it covered civil rights struggles of the corresponding era. In *her* mind, *correlation equated with causation*. She had not done this because the Burns series had said this directly. It had not.

Untangling Free Jazz from Social History

This student is not the only person who had been led to this assumption. For instance, in Brian Harker's recent jazz history textbook, *Jazz: An American Journey*, the author had written, "As the civil rights movement advanced and white southern reactionaries dug in….the music exploded in a metaphorical cry of impatience and frustration, *producing yet another species in the evolution of jazz styles: free jazz.*"[3] (italics added) On the back cover of *Free Jazz and Free Improvisation: An Encyclopedia* by Todd Jenkins is the line "The free jazz revolution that began in the mid-1950s represented an artistic and sociopolitical response to the economic, racial, and musical climate of jazz and the nation."[4] A similar position was also voiced in *The History of Jazz* by Ted Gioia: "It is impossible to comprehend the free jazz movement of these same years without understanding how it fed on this powerful cultural shift in American society."[5]

A problem in presenting this complex period of jazz history is that relations such as *direction* of influence get tangled. (Which came first, the sociopolitical issues or the musical innovations?) For instance: (a) Were any free jazz players making music to express anger over civil rights struggles? Yes. Archie Shepp was one. His politics-inspired pieces, however, were not necessarily free form (for instance, "Malcolm, Malcolm-Semper Malcolm," a eulogy to civil rights leader Malcolm X[6], and "Rufus [Swung His Face at Last to the Wind, Then His Neck Snapped]," a piece about lynching[7]). (b) Did they abandon chord changes *because* of the civil rights-related anger? No. The free-form approach came first. (c) Were there any avant-garde musicians who

[2]Knopf, 2000.
[3]Prentice-Hall, 2005, p. 225.
[4]Greenwood, 2004.
[5]Norton, 1997, p. 338.
[6]Archie Shepp, *Fire Music*. Impulse! AS-86, 1965.
[7]Archie Shepp, *Four for Trane*. Impulse! AS-71, 1964.

protested via music without abandoning chord progressions? Yes. Charles Mingus was one (for instance, "Original Fables of Faubus," with lyrics about Orville Faubus, the segregationist governor of Arkansas,[8] and "Haitian Fight Song"[9]).

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did not originate free jazz, but it may seem that way to a few observers because some free jazz *did appeal* to some musicians who were motivated in part by the civil rights movement. These musicians also adopted approaches and sound qualities associated with some free jazz. Consequently a few styles within free jazz were perceived by some journalists (LeRoi Jones and Frank Kofsky, for instance) and some musicians (Archie Shepp, for instance) as sounding sufficiently angry to provide a new mode of expressing anger over social injustice. So even though civil unrest did not spawn free jazz, these individuals apparently felt that some of the music provided a good soundtrack for it.

It may be helpful also to keep in mind that some avant-garde musicians, including Charles Mingus[10] and Archie Shepp,[11] were not only outspoken and active in the civil rights movement but also were *angry by their temperaments*. Their remarks and their sounds appealed to angry journalists LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka)[12] and Frank Kofsky[13] who adopted the musicians' stance for their own political causes. At the same time, however, we need to remain aware that Mingus and Shepp were not necessarily improvising free of preset chord changes or meter in their protest pieces. Despite following spontaneously shifting tone centers during improvisations in one performance, his 1960 recording of "What Love," which is not a protest piece, the music of Mingus in general cannot be accurately categorized with free jazz, though often it is accurately classified with avant-garde jazz of the era.

This link between avant-garde jazz sounds during the 1960s and the civil rights movement of that era did not necessarily reflect the motives of the *originators* of free jazz. The originators had other inspirations, and those inspirations reflected a fundamental tradition in jazz of continuously seeking new methods and materials. For instance, the most turbulent of saxophonist Albert Ayler's free jazz was inspired by the sounds of ecstatic charismatic Christian church worshippers who were speaking in tongues.[14] The most turbulent of saxophonist John Coltrane's music, whether chord-based, mode-based, or free-form, was motivated by an intense quest for new forms, exploring new variations. Coltrane said, "I've got to keep experimenting."[15]

In attempting to untangle the relations between free jazz and sociopolitical issues, a complicating factor is that free jazz appealed philosophically to some musicians who

[8]Charles Mingus, *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*. Candid 79005, 1960.

[9]Charles Mingus, Atlantic SD 1337, 1957.

[10]Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*. (London: Quartet, 1982).

[11]Archie Shepp, "An Artist Speaks Bluntly." *down beat* 32 (December 16, 1965), 11 and 42; LeRoi Jones, "Voice from the Avant-Garde: Archie Shepp." *down beat* 32 (January 14, 1965), 18, 19, 20, 36; Lawrence Neal, "A Conversation with Archie Shepp." *Liberator* 5, 11 (November 1965), 24-25; Leonard Feather, "Archie Shepp: Some of My Best Friends Are White." *Melody Maker* 41 (April 30, 1966), 6.

[12]*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1971).

[13]*Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. (New York: Pathfinder, 1970).

[14]Derek Van Pelt, "Albert Ayler's Ghost." Cleveland, Ohio: *Cleveland Magazine* (December, 1978), 43.

[15]Bill Coss, album notes to *My Favorite Things*, Atlantic SD 1361, 1960.

sought freedom from pre-existing structures of many sorts, both musical and social. Perhaps when journalists heard the remarks of a few such musicians they failed to realize that these musicians were not *inventing* free jazz; they were just adopting it.

Music History

Another factor that might explain why illusory correlations between politics and jazz styles find their way into jazz histories is that journalists and historians do not know the *early* history of jazz recordings that document the practice of improvising that is free of preset chord changes:

1949. Lennie Tristano, Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh ("Intuition" and "Digression")
1952. Stan Kenton (from 2' 29" to 3' 08" in the Bill Russo arrangement "Improvisation" on *New Concepts in Artistry in Rhythm*)
1953. Teddy Charles, Shorty Rogers, & Jimmy Giuffre ("Bobalob I" and "Bobalob II" on *Collaboration: West*)
1954. Shelly Manne, Shorty Rogers & Jimmy Giuffre ("Abstract #1" on "*The Three" and "The Two"*)
1955. Chico Hamilton ("Free Form" on *The Chico Hamilton Quintet*)
1958. Ornette Coleman (*Something Else*)

Journalists and historians may not know that such musical freedoms were being explored ten years before the widely publicized "free jazz" recordings coincided with heightened intensity of the civil rights movement. Even if they knew the early history, some authors overlooked the facts that: (a) music using free-form approaches was being recorded by white musicians (Tristano, Giuffre, et al.) for about ten years before an African American musician (Ornette Coleman) began gaining media attention for the practice; and that (b) these musicians were not particularly outspoken regarding the civil rights movement nor were they devising their musical approaches in response to civil rights abuses. Teachers and writers who assume a cause-and-effect link between emerging political freedoms and musical freedoms also overlooked the fact that: (c) other bands also continued to play free jazz in the 1960s without being inspired by politics. Though *some* free jazz could be inspired by politics, none of the first ten years' worth of free jazz recordings by the originators was inspired by the civil rights movement, even that made by the mixed-race bands of Chico Hamilton and Ornette Coleman, whose African American members would certainly have experienced enough civil rights abuses to be motivated accordingly.

How Do Jazz Styles Originate?

Though the present article is about what did *not* cause free jazz, it may be useful to mention what *did* cause free jazz and to distinguish the paths used by a few significant

artists. Whereas the free-form performances of Tristano, Giuffre, Rogers, et al were created by musicians who were thoroughly facile in basing improvisations on the movement of chords, the free-form performances of Coleman and Albert Ayler represent playing by improvisers who were not facile in devising jazz lines compatible with chord progressions. Tristano, Giuffre, Rogers, et al chose not to set harmonic guidelines beforehand, even though they could if they had wished. By contrast, Ayler and Coleman improvised solos *despite* not knowing how to devise lines that directly reflected chordal accompaniments. Documentation for this latter situation is presented next.

Trumpeter Nate Horwitz was a colleague of Ayler in their hometown of Cleveland. Horwitz said that Ayler did not understand how to devise a jazz solo from standard chord progressions.[16] Bassist Andre Condouant recalled Ayler occasionally sitting in with the band of Al Lirvat at the café' La Cigale in Paris, France. "He knew the repertoire but couldn't improvise so much; he played like an amateur . . . . He would play 'I'll Remember April' or stuff like that, and was unable to stick to even the basic harmonies"[17] This is illustrated in Ayler's 1962 recordings of "On Green Dolphin Street" and "Summertime," in which he played with a pianist, guitarist and bassist who were following the chord changes and providing standard jazz accompaniment.[18] Note that reports that Ayler knew some Charlie Parker solos[19] reveal only that he knew the lines, not necessarily that he understood how they related to their chordal accompaniments. It did not demonstrate that Ayler understood bebop and only chose to ignore its technique.

Pianist Harold Batiste was a colleague of Ornette Coleman's in Los Angeles in 1956. Batiste said that Coleman knew some Parker tunes and solos but that Coleman either did not understand or was not interested in how the lines in them related to the chords in the accompaniment. "He didn't know how to play conventional, and then just decided to keep doing it even when it didn't fit, as though it had to belong somewhere . . . . I don't think he could've played like everybody else played."[20] Pianist Paul Bley has played with Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Jimmy Giuffre, and Sonny Rollins. He hired Coleman for his own band in 1958. Bley remarked that, "While Ornette was soloing on a 32-bar piece, suddenly he would play eight bars that had no relationship, or relatively little relationship to anything else in the piece."[21] This is illustrated by Coleman's 1958 recording of "Klactoveesedstene" with Bley.[22] This is evident also in the mismatch between Coleman's improvisations and the piano accompaniment of Walter Norris on Coleman's first album, *Something Else*.[23]

By contrast, two of the top musicians of the period who were attracted to Coleman's methods were thoroughly facile in chord-based improvisation. One was Don Cherry,

[16]Personal communication, November, 1976.

[17]Albert Ayler. Interview by Daniel Caux, July 27, 1970, on *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings* (Revenant 213, Disc 8).

[18]Examples of Ayler not playing on chord changes, even though the rest of the band is, are on *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings*. (Revenant 213, Disc 1).

[19]Todd Jenkins, *Free Jazz and Free Improvisation*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 20.

[20]Personal communication, December 10, 2006.

[21]Paul Bley and David Lee, *Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz* (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1999), 63.

[22]*Paul Bley at the Hillcrest Club*. Inner City 1007, 1958.

[23]Contemporary 7551, 1958.

the top trumpeter in free jazz and Coleman's band mate on many albums. He had actually been performing in a bebop style before he met Coleman, and he later demonstrated mastery of such "inside" playing on the Sonny Rollins album *Our Man in Jazz*,[24] though he chose to play outside the chord changes whenever he wished.

The other was saxophonist John Coltrane, who, like Cherry, also was thoroughly facile in improvising lines that continuously reflected their accompaniment harmonies, but he studiously explored methods of improvising in which minimal harmonic restrictions were in effect. In this regard, Coltrane's record producer Bob Thiele said that "He always felt restricted playing within the chord, staying within the chords of, say, a Cole Porter song . . . . He explained it technically, as to why one could leave the chords. 'Who says there has to be a restriction on what you play?'"[25] Coltrane actually studied with Coleman to pursue this, just as he had studied the music of India to expand his capacity to extract music from modes.

From the above discussion, we can see that different kinds of free jazz had different origins. The players came to it from different directions. The free-form work of Tristano, Giuffre, Bley, Rogers, Cherry, and Coltrane represented chord-based improvisers intentionally abandoning prearrangement in order to provide themselves with fresh formats with which to approach improvisation. In regard to discovering Ornette Coleman and Coleman's new approaches, Paul Bley said, "There had been a great deal of thought as to how to break the bondage of chord structures over meter . . . . Ornette was so early that Coltrane was an interim step which coexisted with Ornette, whereas historically it should have preceded Ornette."[26] The free-form work of Ayler and Coleman, on the other hand, seems to have represented a continuation of apparently *not knowing* how to base jazz solos on chord changes. We dare not use this fact to diminish the historic stature of either musician, however, just as knowing that Erroll Garner and Wes Montgomery could not read music should be appreciated as irrelevant to valuing their contributions. Ayler and Coleman were enormously original and influential, and they are justly celebrated for it. For example, Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* album is highly respected, it remains a staple in the collections of jazz saxophonists, and Coleman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. Keep in mind, however, that their situation was a blessing in disguise because being unable and/or unwilling to play "inside" the chord changes combined with the extraordinary fertility of these players' melodic imaginations to drive innovations that were "outside." Crucial to the present article is the fact that the above discussion of how free jazz originated also reveals that *none of these directions represented responses to civil rights struggles*.

Jazz Creativity is Multi-Determined

Commentators failed to understand that most musicians make the music just for the sake of making music. A telling example can be found by recounting an incident during

[24]RCA LSP 2612, 1962.

[25]Ted Fox, *In the Groove: The People Behind the Music*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 193.

[26]Bill Smith, "Paul Bley," *CODA* (April 1979), 166.

which journalist Frank Kofsky was trying to graft his own political agenda onto the music of saxophonist Albert Ayler and began coaxing Ayler to endorse Black anger as a root of Ayler's music. Ayler replied, "Politics and music. They can be related in some way, but music is music and politics is politics . . . . Musicians make music."[27] Clarification was further provided by 1960s avant-garde saxophonist Marion Brown, who said, "When I play my music I'm not playing anything else at all. I'm not putting down anything that you could express in words. I don't play about religion, or the Universe, or Love, or Hate, or Soul."[28]

In addition to missing the fact that the originators of free jazz were not inspired by politics, some journalists and historians have also overlooked the fact that some musicians were exploring free jazz for purely aesthetic and technical reasons. For instance, the most eminent free-jazz innovator, Ornette Coleman, reported that in 1948 when playing "Star Dust" with Red Connors, "That's when I started investigating other possibilities of playing music without having any straight guidelines as far as changes or chords are concerned."[29] This recalls the remark of Coltrane quoted above, "I've got to keep experimenting."

These writers' problems might also stem from a larger tendency. Commentators apparently have failed to appreciate that musicians have a host of different things in mind when they make music. Forces behind any given jazz performance include personal, technical, and environmental factors, all impinging at the same time. For instance, when asked to tell what they were thinking while improvising, Dizzy Gillespie said, "I'm thinking about how to get the line to resolve through the turnaround."[30] Wayne Shorter said, "I'm thinking about how to play something I've never played before."[31] Joe Henderson said, "I'm trying to play off the drummer's rhythms."[32]

Emphasizing Dramatic Exceptions

Tendencies toward illusory correlations between politics and instrumental music have increased because, in addressing the avant-garde jazz of the 1960s, writers and videographers have given disproportionate attention to dramatic exceptions, such as "Fables of Faubus" by Charles Mingus and "The Freedom Now Suite" by Max Roach. The Ken Burns *JAZZ* series devoted the bulk of its television coverage of Roach and Mingus to these selections despite the fact that neither piece typifies themes in the bulk of either artist's extensive output (less than 4% of Mingus's 150 compositions, for instance). This practice also occurred in the media's linking John Coltrane to the civil rights protest movement by their coverage of his "Alabama." That piece became the only part of Coltrane's vast output that was included in Martin Williams' jazz history and

[27]Frank Kofsky, "An Interview with Albert and Donald Ayler." *Jazz and Pop* (September, 1968), 21.

[28]quoted in Charles Fox's liner notes for Marion Brown album *Porto Novo*, Arista-Freedom 1001, recorded in 1967, released in 1975.

[29]A. B. Spellman, *Four Jazz Lives* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U of Michigan Press, 2004), 93.

[30]Personal communication, Cleveland, Ohio, January 1971.

[31]Personal communication, Cleveland, Ohio, April 7, 1976.

[32]Personal communication, Cleveland, Ohio, November, 1987.

recording compilation *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, and it became the piece that was emphasized for coverage of Coltrane in the Ken Burns television documentary *JAZZ*, vol. 10. This occurred despite the fact that it was Coltrane's only politically-connected piece, and "Alabama" was actually a lament, not a piece of angry "protest music." It expressed his mourning the deaths of four children in the racist bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama. Unlike the political slant that some writers put upon his music, most of Coltrane's performances at that time derived from pop tunes ("Inch Worm," "My Favorite Things," "Nature Boy," "Out of this World," "Chim Chim Cheree," for example), technical explorations ("Giant Steps," "Countdown," "Miles' Mode," for instance), expansions of his interest in music from other cultures ("India," "Ole`," "Brazilia," for instance), and openly worshipful religiosity ("Dear Lord," "A Love Supreme," "Song of Praise," for instance).

In linking free jazz with civil rights protests, the above-cited tendencies were complicated by: (a) identifying music that was both free of preset form *and* perceived as angry "protest music" (such as Kofsky's and Jones' perception of Albert Ayler's playing, as sampled in his *Spiritual Unity* album); and then (b) failing to distinguish it from music that was *not free* of preset form but *was* perceived as angry, such as a few political-themed pieces by Charles Mingus ("Haitian Fight Song" and "Fables of Faubus"), which are tightly organized, not free-form at all. Furthering the confusion is the fact that these Mingus works: (c) are often classified with "avant-garde jazz," a label that is, in turn, sometimes (d) interchanged with free jazz, for which it is not equivalent.[33] This problem is addressed next.

Distinguishing "Free" from Avant-Garde

Ordinarily, the music of individuals who are ahead of their peers in developing the newest, freshest creations can be referred to as "avant-garde." Unfortunately, this term has been applied in recent writing about numerous jazz styles that were prominent during the 1960s and 1970s, as though "avant-garde" was an actual style of its own. New kinds of jazz in the 1960s were often merely called "avant-garde," "the new thing," or "out music," instead of earning such original names as Dixieland and bebop that had been coined to designate previous styles.[34] This classification was very loose, and it not only led outsiders: (a) to assume that the different musicians of this era had more in common than they actually did; but also (b) to believe that this was the only period in which "avant-garde" jazz was created. Such outsiders would then be overlooking, for instance, recordings by Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano that qualify Parker and Tristano as avant-garde for the 1940s.

One of the approaches employed by a few musicians of the 1960s avant-garde was improvisation that was not tied to any progression of chords that was agreed upon before the performance. Sometimes such improvisation was not tied to steady tempo or

[33]Brian Harker, *Jazz: An American Journey*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2005), 253. Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History, Second Edition*. (Norton, 1995), 376.

[34]Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis,* 10th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 2008), 306-8.

meter, either. "Free jazz" is the classification for this approach, and it is most closely associated with Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. A model for much of this music is a 1960 Coleman album called *Free Jazz*[35] that contains simultaneous collective improvisation by two bands attempting to remain free of preset key, melody, chord progressions, and meter.

Further complicating the issues, we note that the term "free jazz" when used to designate the music of Ornette Coleman can be misleading if taken literally, because very little of the music on the *Free Jazz* album is *entirely* free of tempo, key, or traditional distinctions between soloists and accompanists. Moreover, there is *some* preset melody, organization of themes or other structure in a substantial portion of Coleman's other albums, too. An additional problem arises when the term "avant-garde" has been used interchangeably with "free jazz" by a few journalists and historians despite the fact that only some avant-garde jazz of the 1960s and 1970s was free form.[36]

Making matters even worse, a pervasive oversight has been the failure to acknowledge how much of any given avant-garde musician's output did not entirely adhere to preset chord progressions, tempo, meter, and conventions between solo and accompaniment roles. For example, only a tiny portion of John Coltrane's output dispenses with most aspects of organization that jazz musicians conventionally preset, yet Coltrane's name is often classified with free jazz because of: (a) those few pieces that have minimal preset aspects; and (b) the fact that so much of his work *sounds* wild and unconventional. (Even Coltrane's *Ascension*, which is often classified as "free jazz," actually follows a sequence of four scales.) A large portion of Coltrane's most free-sounding music was based on extensive repetition of a few chords and/or modes, or, at least, on a motif that had been agreed upon beforehand. It was not based on spontaneously shifting tone centers, as in the improvised passages in the recordings of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor.

In addition to the problem of writers failing to distinguish free jazz from civil freedom-themed pieces, further confusion continues to be caused when writers fail to distinguish free jazz from avant-garde jazz of the 1960s as a whole. Jazz performances with free-form passages occupied only a small slice of avant-garde jazz at that time, and the avant-garde category also included practices of modal jazz (by George Russell, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, for example) and explorations in odd meters (by Dave Brubeck and Don Ellis, for instance), to name just a few other trends. Even recordings that Bill Evans, Scott LaFaro, and Paul Motian made at the Village Vanguard in 1961 were avant-garde for the time.[37] In drawing illusory correlations between political movements and musical innovations, journalists: (a) correctly identified some avant-garde players as militant yet failed to observe that they were not necessarily following free-form approaches; and (b) journalists cast civil rights issues as inspiring avant-garde jazz as a whole.

[35]Atlantic 1364, 1960.

[36]See footnote 32

[37]Bill Evans, *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* (Riverside 60-017) employs floating pulse (subtle ways of phrasing so as to avoid accenting the most obvious beats), absence of walking bass, staggered placement of phrases, displaced and fragmented drumming accompaniments, reharmonizations of comping chords, blurring of turnarounds, quartal harmonies, playing in and out of swing feeling.

Subjectivity in Music Perception

Taking commentators seriously is another persistent problem among uncritical authors and readers. It has ramifications in generating illusory correlations of cause-and-effect between civil rights strivings and free jazz strivings. Many of us fail to become suspicious that the most vocal commentators are personalizing the music, rather than reporting on the artist's intentions. Poet-playwright-activist-saxophonist Archie Shepp provided a telling example of mistaking one's own impressions for the creators' intentions when he was talking about the playing of saxophonist John Coltrane, "Some of his solos have exactly the rage that was being expressed in the streets, by the Muslims and the Panthers, and many people thought Trane's music was very angry."[38] A number of interviews with Coltrane, however, revealed that his intentions were the opposite of Shepp's perceptions. Coltrane said, for example, "…I want to produce beautiful music, music that does things to people that they need. Music that will uplift, and make them happy . . . ."[39] " . . . what music is to me — it's just another way of saying this is a big, beautiful universe we live in, that's been given to us, and here's an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is."[40] Subsequent studies on more than 800 listeners, representing all levels of familiarity with jazz, found that only a small percentage of listeners perceive anger in Coltrane's playing, and the studies revealed that most listeners who do perceive it are themselves above average in anger.[41]

Such tendencies are particularly troublesome for teaching jazz history when instructors do not realize that most students are not sufficiently sophisticated to notice when journalists are personalizing the music. For example, they are unlikely to appreciate how subjective is this reference by Frank Kofsky to a tune written during the 1940s by bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker titled "Now's the Time." "I was fairly confident that the title of Charlie Parker's 'Now's the Time' means . . . now's the time to abolish racism, discrimination, oppression and Jim Crow."[42] Might students realize that "Now's the Time" is too open a remark for anyone to know what it relates to? The sentence stem of "Now's the Time" could be completed with almost any meaning by a propagandist. Additionally, most students would not notice the extent of subjectivity in this account of John Coltrane's work of the 1960s by LeRoi Jones " . . . reflecting through exact emotional analogy the turbulent period in which he lived." They might also miss the leap made by Jones when he characterized Coltrane as "Malcolm X in New Super Bop Fire."[43] Even if these perceptions seem plausible, they are still just the personal percep-

[38]Ashley Kahn, *The House That Trane Built*. (New York: Norton, 2006), 131.

[39]Valerie Wilmer, "Conversation with Coltrane." *Jazz Journal* (January, 1962), 2.

[40]Don DeMichael, "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy answer their critics." *down beat* (April 12, 1962), 20-23.

[41]Mark C. Gridley: a. "Who's Actually Angry, John Coltrane or His Critics?" *Psychology Journal,* 2007, volume 4, issue 4, pp. 153-60; b. "Can Trait Anger Influence Music Perception?" *Creativity Research Journal,* 2008, volume 20; c. "The Unreliability of Jazz Improvisation for Communicating Emotion: Evaluating Anger Perceptions in John Coltrane's Saxophone Improvisations," manuscript submitted for publication.

[42]*Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 56. Might Kofsky have rejected the possibility that Parker himself did not title the recording, as we know often occurred? Might Kofsky have missed the possibility that it was a flippant remark referring to an occurrence during the recording session?

[43]LeRoi Jones. "Jazz Criticism and its Effect on the Art Form." In David Baker, ed., *New Perspectives in Jazz*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1986), 66. Ascribing political anger to Coltrane's music is not the only

tions of an outside observer, not facts about the music. Yet listeners' needs for music to have programmatic intent make them sufficiently gullible to accept journalists' personal perceptions *as facts* of relations between music and politics. Since such journalists offer no rival explanations for the same sounds, and they express their perceptions with conviction, uncritical readers are not inclined to generate equally plausible alternate explanations or realize that the journalists could be wrong.

Failing to make essential distinctions in their reading of accounts by journalists and musicians may be part of what has confused students, writers, and teachers. They failed to distinguish what actually *inspired* the music, for example "speaking in tongues" for Albert Ayler's wildest free-form improvisations, from what was *perceived* in the music, such as Black anger over civil rights struggles according to journalists LeRoi Jones and Frank Kofsky. The listeners' desires for instrumental music to have programmatic aspects might have contributed to overlooking these distinctions.

Confusion may have been increased when students, authors and instructors failed to distinguish *the originators' techniques*, such as abandoning chord changes, from what others had *appropriated* the music for: an expression of the civil rights freedom movement. The authors of books on jazz history did not learn the rest of the story before going to press and perpetuating the myth. Ultimately instructors unwittingly continue to mislead students because they have *confused the music's effect with its inspiration*.

Music Just Expresses Itself

The issue of swallowing the perceptions of forceful journalists may remind us that unlike vocal music in which meaning can be explicitly expressed by lyrics, purely instrumental music is open to diverse interpretations. Germane to the present article, this tendency is especially misleading when the music may be about the sounds for their own sake, not about sociopolitical issues. This point was made more than forty years ago in Igor Stravinsky's remark that, "music expresses itself."[44] More than seventy years ago, he also reminded us, "Those tedious commentaries on the side issues of music not only do not facilitate its understanding, but, on the contrary, are a serious obstacle which prevents an understanding of its essence and substance."[45]

example of Jones' projection, having equated the saxophonist with militant leader Malcolm X ["He was Malcolm X in New Super Bop Fire." *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 271]. He had attributed the music of saxophonist Charlie Parker's immense talent to similar motivation. Though many listeners perceive the improvised solos of Parker (nicknamed "Bird") as joyful exuberance, Jones projected his own angry personality and racial attitudes by assigning the following sentiment to Parker's playing via one of his characters in his "Dutchman" play (1964): "Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay!" "Bird would've played not a note of music if he just walked up to East 67th Street and killed the first ten white people he saw."

[44]Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions & Developments* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 114-15.

[45]*Stravinsky: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), 256.

Oversights and Muddy Thinking

Journalists and historians exhibit oversights and muddy thinking when they link civil rights anger and freedom seeking with free jazz. Some writers apparently failed to notice that some jazz that *was free* of preset form did *not* sound turbulent. Some of Ornette Coleman's free improvisation from 1958 to 1965 is melodic and swinging (for instance, "Congeniality" on his *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, and "Dee Dee" on his *At the "Golden Circle" Stockholm, vol. 1*). Much of Jimmy Giuffre's and Paul Bley's free improvisation, from the 1950s through the 1980s, is subdued (for instance, *Free Fall*).

The implication of cause-and-effect is muddied by the aptness for symbolism that is offered by the tumultuous character of some free jazz. Apparently taking a cue from LeRoi Jones and Frank Kofsky, Brian Harker missed the distinction between aptness and inspiration when he wrote, " . . . free jazz reflected the tumult in society . . . . "[46] " . . . this music seemed a faithful reflection of the militant drive for freedom in society."[47] Saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler, among the most important innovators of free jazz, denied such motivations and were annoyed that their music was being described this way. Upset that his music was being attributed to militancy and Black anger, Albert Ayler actually visited Black Nationalist journalist LeRoi Jones and told him that the music reviewer's published perceptions were really about Jones, not about him.[48] Don Ayler, Albert's brother and trumpet playing band mate, was very disturbed by this misattribution and said, "The music was about love, not hate."[49] Similarly, John Coltrane's record producer Bob Thiele remarked, " . . . for the literary fraternity, the music of Coltrane and others…really represented black militancy. Most of the musicians, including Coltrane, really weren't thinking the way their militant brothers were. I mean, LeRoi Jones could feel the music was militant, but Coltrane didn't feel that it was. But he didn't go out of his way to tell Leroi Jones that."[50]

Musical Phenomenon or Media Phenomenon: Music History or Polemics?

A few journalists seemed to be mistaking their own wishes for the motives of their favorite artists, as in LeRoi Jones's characterization of Coltrane as a jazz Malcolm X. These journalists apparently wanted to recruit the music and musicians so badly for their own favorite social causes that they could not believe the music of avant-garde jazz players was not inspired by those same causes. Frank Kofsky wrote in 1965, "Artists, especially when the art is closely tied to the existence of a people as is jazz, cannot be

[46]Harker, 248.

[47]*Ibid*., 253.

[48]LeRoi Jones, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*. (New York: Freundlich, 1984), 194-95.

[49]Personal communication, Cleveland, Ohio, June, 1992

[50]In ed. Ted Fox, *In the Groove: The People Behind the Music*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 196. Coltrane ultimately asked his producer to stop putting essays, such as the misleading remarks of Jones and Kofsky, in the liner notes for his albums. Subsequently, Coltrane's album jacket notes contained only tune titles, composer credits, and personnel listings.

expected to remain aloof from the concerns of society at large . . . ."[51] Wanting the musicians as allies, a few journalists misperceived musical motivations and linked their favorite sounds with the civil rights freedom movement, thereby including players whose music *did not have a political agenda*. Forty years later, in his *Free Jazz and Free Improvisation: An Encyclopedia*, Todd Jenkins demonstrated similar thinking: "As is usually the case in times of cultural upheaval, the nation's artists reacted in personal yet pertinent ways. One consequent result was the frenetic, cathartic musical form known as 'free jazz'."[52]

Kofsky and Jones are largely discredited by knowledgeable scholars.[53] Jazz history books, however, are still being written in ways that uncritically perpetuate their stance. Moreover, some instructors use the polemics by Kofsky (*Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*) and Jones (*Blues People*) as course textbooks without explaining to students that the works largely support personal observations and opinion, not necessarily music history. They also use other books whose authors have uncritically accepted the thinking of Kofsky and Jones. The result is a huge enrollment of jazz students thinking that politics constitute a substantial cause for improvisational styles, free jazz in particular.

Conclusions

Free jazz did not originate in the struggle for racial freedom and equality during the 1960s. The civil rights movement proceeded at the same time as a small movement in jazz that had dispensed with preset chord progressions as basis for improvisation, thereby "free" of song structure as a guide to spontaneous music. The free-form musicians' freedom was musical, not social.

Certainly there are musicians influenced in their art by the politics of their time, but the number of musicians in jazz and the extent of political influence in jazz have been exaggerated by the media. Maybe this is because: (a) it is easier to write about politics than what is actually happening in the music; (b) it is more exciting to describe sensational events of social strife and racial injustice; and (c) sociopolitical forces are easier to understand than the mysterious processes of individual creativity.

[51]Frank Kofsky. Liner notes to *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays*. Impulse! AS-85, 1965.

[52]*Free Jazz and Free Improvisation: An Encyclopedia*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2004), xxiii.

[53]See Joe Goldberg, personal communication, July 14, 2006; Chris Colombi, personal communication, February, 1981; Harvey Pekar, personal communication, July, 1983; Jon Goldman, June, 2003, personal communication. Regarding linking free jazz to the American civil rights movement, Todd Jenkins wrote, " . . . despite certain writers like Frank Kofsky, it was absolutely not a universal incitement" *Free Jazz and Free Improvisation: An Encyclopedia*. [Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2004), xliii. Note how Coltrane politely resisted Kofsky's attempts to characterize his music as a militant expression in Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (Pathfinder Press, 1970), 221-43]. John Gennari has placed the writing of Kofsky and Jones in their historical moment and revealed how their political stance in the atmosphere of their time fed their politicizing of avant-garde jazz, which they appropriated for their own biases. [See *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 252-53, 258-60, and 262-64]. Gennari agrees that they made spurious arguments about the environment influencing jazz (personal communication, September 24, 2007).

It is tempting to attribute a cause-and-effect relation between civil rights struggles and avant-garde jazz of the 1960s, but it is important to distinguish between: (a) independent *personal* creativity; (b) music that is *motivated* by political anger (which turns out to be very little); and (c) music that has been *adopted* as a symbolic expression of a political movement. Recall Albert Ayler's response to journalist Frank Kofsky's vain attempt to link Ayler's music to the politics of Malcolm X. "Politics and music. They can be related in some way, but music is music and politics is politics . . . . Musicians make music."

Implications for Pedagogy

The proper connection of simple elements is the basis for functional communication between teachers and students. In communication, information is almost always lost. Most veteran teachers know that fine distinctions, caveats, and parenthetical remarks are the first to be missed by students. New information must be pruned by students who already have much else on their minds. Since there is almost always something lost in transmission, and even more in recall, it would seem to be counterproductive to teach musical innovations in the context of American history. Under any circumstances, teachers risk the possibility that students will infer cause-and-effect relations where there are none. Did the seeking of civil rights freedoms *cause* the search for musical freedoms? No. The free jazz movement sprang from musical sources, not social forces. But will students catch that distinction? Even scholars Harker and Jenkins missed it.

The existence of illusory correlations has serious implications for teaching today because increasing numbers of instructors are requiring students to study films and books whose authors imply or overstate questionable links between sociopolitical issues and origination of jazz styles. Awareness of this is crucial for teachers and authors who favor presentations about social and historic context in addition to the music itself. It may be prudent to just introduce the jazz styles themselves without venturing into concurrent socio-cultural history because illusory correlations between free jazz and civil rights strivings is not the only erroneous link that crops up. For example, writers have also made illusory correlations between World War II, race relations, and the emergence of bebop.[54] Otherwise, students may conclude that most instrumental music is

[54]Writing about the origins of bebop, Dave Banks, for example, contended that to understand bebop we must consider the "creative musician's psychological response *toward the war*" [italics added] which had "forced the musical imagination further into the infinite reaches of its expression producing a revolutionary approach to music." ("Be-Bop Called Merely the Beginning of a New Creative Music Form," *down beat*, 11 February 1948, 16.) LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) wrote "The period that saw bebop develop, *during and after* [italics added] World War II, was a very unstable time for most Americans. There was a need for radical readjustment to the demands of the postwar world. The [race] riots throughout the country appear as directly related to the psychological tenor of that time as the emergence of the 'new' music." (*Blues People* [New York: Harper/Collins, 1999], 210) Banks, Jones, and others have overlooked at least four considerations that suggest sources other than such a sociopolitical origin for bebop. (1) The emergence of bebop culminated intense studying that its founders had already undertaken during the 1930s, not necessarily "during and after World War II." (2) Full-scale U.S. involvement in WWII was not achieved until 1942, although the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and Germany had declared war on the U.S. December 11, 1941. Yet Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie had already formed bebop by 1943. Being only a year later would have provided insufficient time to develop an entire style. (3) Gillespie's main model was the virtuosic, explosive style of trumpeter Roy Eldridge, who was known for harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic surprises in the 1930s. Therefore, if bebop struck

inspired by extra-musical factors, when, in reality, politics did not motivate the new styles themselves. Additionally it is significant to consider that political history lessons in brief courses about jazz styles can easily edge out precious time for the more important task of coaching listening skills.

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Banks and Jones as explosive, and they inferred that such character reflected the agitation of the times, they overlooked the fact that before gaining notoriety for bebop during the WWII years, Gillespie already had a taste for making music containing the exciting musical devices of Eldridge. They overlooked the fact that Gillespie had already been playing fast, and frequenting the high-register, as documented in his recordings with the Teddy Hill Band in 1937. Since these characteristics of his volcanic style were not unique to his work "during and after WWII," it is not likely that Gillespie created these aspects of his style in response to any sociopolitical "tenor of that time" that had also caused race riots in the 1940s. (4) Since Parker's new style was already apparent in the recordings that he made in Wichita during 1940 with Jay McShann, Banks and Jones missed the fact that Parker's bebop innovations predated WWII and predated the greatest sociopolitical upheavals for African Americans. If Banks and Jones were attributing the agitated character of Parker's playing to the "psychological tenor of that time," they may have been overlooking the facts that: (a) all Parker's models had already been prominent during the 1930s; and (b) several of them, including Art Tatum, had specialized in practices that could lead to listener agitation, such as double-timing, asymmetrical accents, and substitute chord changes. Parker's lines that run a sequence of different keys, often a half-step away from the tune's key, are likely to reflect instruction he received in his hometown of Kansas City from Efferge Ware during the 1930s. Being aware of Tatum, Ware, and other models of the 1930s, such as Buster Smith, Coleman Hawkins, and Lester Young, is a more likely inspiration for Parker's style than being aware of any sociopolitical "tenor of that time" as LeRoi Jones believed. (For discography and elaboration of these points, see Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis, 10th edition* [Prentice-Hall, 2008], pages 198-99.)

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