

Introduction

The short version of the story of free jazz is that in 1959 Ornette Coleman came to New York playing music that did not use preset structures for improvising. This influenced established musicians from his generation including John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins, and Miles Davis, and inspired younger players to explore new approaches, initially in New York, then in Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Europe, South Africa, Japan, and worldwide. Musicians organized their own performance venues, record labels, and cooperative organizations to control, support, and present their own work. This drive for creative freedom and economic self-determination paralleled the radical politics of the 1960s, especially the African-American civil rights and Black Power movements.

This version is basically true, but it does not address this music's diversity, complexity, or endurance. It doesn't mention the musicians exploring similar areas before or alongside Coleman and understates the amount of structure and composition in his music and in free jazz in general. It also risks limiting free jazz to the 1960s and early 1970s, as one might think of bebop as a music of the 1940s and 1950s or disco the 1970s, while vital work continues to be made both by free jazz artists from the 1960s, such as Marshall Allen, Barry Altschul, Han Bennink, Karl Berger, Carla Bley, Bobby Bradford, Anthony Braxton, Peter Brötzmann, Andrew Cyrille, Barry Guy, Dave Holland, Roscoe Mitchell, Evan Parker, Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp, Alan Silva, Wadada Leo Smith, Henry Threadgill, Trevor Watts, and Reggie Workman, and by subsequent generations.

The innovations of free jazz can mostly be understood as alternatives to song form, which had previously defined a common practice. Although a wide variety of variations and complications were possible, a

jazz performance essentially consisted of a melodic theme, followed by improvised solos on the form of the theme, then a concluding restatement of the theme. The rhythm section repeated the chord progression of the theme throughout while soloists invented new melodies that fit those harmonies. The twelve-bar blues is the most essential of these forms, while other themes and their forms largely came from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway. Jazz grew up alongside these popular music institutions from the 1920s to the 1960s, and the canon of jazz standards overlaps substantially with the American Songbook of composers such as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers. Jazz soloists from Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane developed their styles to navigate the harmonies common in this music, and jazz composers of this era, whether Duke Ellington or Horace Silver, wrote essentially in song form using a combination of blues and show-tune harmony.

This common practice enabled musicians to collaborate with minimal preparation and has facilitated such intergenerational and polystylistic teams as John Coltrane and Duke Ellington, Sonny Rollins and Coleman Hawkins, John Zorn and Big John Patton, and various Jazz at the Philharmonic lineups. At the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival bassist Henry Grimes played in bands led by Benny Goodman, Lee Konitz, Thelonious Monk, Gerry Mulligan, Sonny Rollins, and Tony Scott, an extraordinary feat, possible in part because these groups, and every other at the festival, were grounded in a common practice. These artists had different composing and soloing styles, but they all played over cyclic song forms using familiar chord progressions outlined by swinging walking bass lines.

There is plenty of free jazz that uses song forms. For example, Archie Shepp's "Mama Too Tight" is a funky blues that easily could have been recorded by Lee Morgan or James Brown's bands, and David Murray's "Flowers for Albert" is a thirty-two-bar AABA song using standard harmonies. These tunes are free jazz because of the choices the soloists make and because Shepp and Murray's careers have unfolded in what sociologists would call the "art world" of free jazz.¹ The musicians they work with, labels they record for, venues they play, magazines and websites that cover them, and so on, are all connected to free jazz.

However, this book will focus on the alternatives to song form introduced through free jazz. Composer/bassist Charles Mingus, pianist Paul Bley, and composer/author Gunther Schuller all observed in the 1950s that, although bebop musicians were stretching tonality in their composed and improvised melodies, they remained tethered to popular

song harmonies. In his 1957 essay “The Future of Form in Jazz,” Schuller listed a dozen compositional innovators, highlighting Mingus and Jimmy Giuffre in particular, but concluded that the music was waiting for a “new Charlie Parker” to introduce the next style after bebop. Bley, who worked with Parker, Mingus, Giuffre, and Ornette Coleman, among others, makes the same observations in his memoir, and both he and Schuller claim Coleman became that “new Charlie Parker.”²

Trumpet player and composer Bill Dixon, organizer of the 1964 October Revolution, the first free jazz festival, argued that the “revolution” was moving from a song form–based common practice to a constellation of idiosyncratic musical concepts associated with individual artists. Like Mingus, Schuller, and Bley, he saw these new approaches as exploring implications of bebop without the underlying structures borrowed from popular music.³

There were experiments with free improvisation by modernists, including some of the players listed by Schuller and Bley, such as Lennie Tristano’s “Intuition” and “Digression” in 1949, Shelly Manne’s “Abstract #1” from 1954 with Jimmy Giuffre and Shorty Rogers, Chico Hamilton’s 1955 “Free Form,” Mingus’s “Getting Together” and “Gregarian Chant,” and an unreleased series of 1957 workshop sessions where composer Edgard Varèse directed a group that included Mingus.⁴ However, none of these led to free playing becoming a major element of any artist’s approach or a recognized jazz style.

“Free jazz” did not become a genre name until the late 1960s. Terms like “the New Thing,” the avant-garde, playing “out,” “outside,” “free,” or “freeform” circulated, and Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones), one of the music’s main critical advocates, tried to popularize “New Black Music,” but Ornette Coleman’s 1961 album *Free Jazz* eventually lent its name to the movement.⁵ Coleman, like many free jazz artists, attempted to reject the term. He claimed the album was named by his record company, that he never liked the title, and that it did not reflect how he understood his music.⁶ Pianist Marilyn Crispell has said she “hates” the label, and many other artists such as Julius Hemphill, Misha Mengelberg, and Anthony Braxton have similarly disavowed it.⁷ According to George Lewis, the members of Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) cooperative almost never referred to their music as “free jazz.”⁸

Lewis has also argued that the music of the AACM and their peers should not be considered jazz at all, and that doing so can be a musical

version of the racist “one-drop” rule under which one African-American ancestor made a person legally Black. He observes that Black experimentalists such as Anthony Braxton, Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Davis, and himself are frequently described and judged as jazz musicians, no matter what their music is like, while white experimentalists such as Earle Brown, LaMonte Young, Derek Bailey, John Zorn, and Keith Rowe are assumed to have transcended their backgrounds in jazz, even when their work includes improvisation, propulsive rhythms, or other qualities commonly associated with jazz.⁹ Applying a prescriptive or traditionalist definition of jazz, such as Stanley Crouch’s “swing, blues, ballads, and the Spanish tinge,” to much of the music called free jazz will find it wanting, just as a search for those elements in the music of LaMonte Young or Keith Rowe will fail. Describing Lewis as a “jazz composer” rather than as a composer who sometimes writes and plays jazz presumes both that, like Crouch, we know what jazz is, and that we know Lewis is part of it. It narrowly defines the genre, assigns artists to it, and judges them by that definition, ignoring their intentions or the manifest characteristics of their work.

However, Lewis also describes “jazz” as a “social location within which sound and musical practice take on additional meanings.”¹⁰ Free jazz artists have occupied this location, voluntarily or not, and some have claimed the jazz tradition as one of ongoing exploration, a “perpetual frontier,” as guitarist Joe Morris entitled his book.¹¹ The label can be understood to authorize creativity rather than confine it, although it still carries racial and cultural hierarchy.

This study will try to avoid Crouch-like essential definitions of jazz or free jazz but to consider artists and works on their own terms. This means pieces such as Anthony Braxton’s “Composition 76” and Wadada Leo Smith’s “The Bell” will be discussed as examples of new compositional and improvisational options opened by free jazz. They would not exist if there was no free jazz, but whether or not they are themselves jazz or free jazz will be left to the listener.

Saxophonist Ken Vandermark has argued that free jazz lasted from Ornette Coleman’s 1959 New York debut to John Coltrane’s death in 1967. Of course, many artists associated with free jazz continued making work after 1967, and new ones, including Vandermark himself, have emerged since. His claim is that after 1967 free jazz had become a knowable style, and that after the late 1960s musicians often used the techniques associated with Coleman, Coltrane, and other first-generation free jazz players

such as Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler alongside other elements.¹² This study is grounded in the period defined by Vandermark but will follow artists and ideas to the present. One model for this is Thomas Owens's *Bebop: The Music and Its Players*, which traces the dissemination of musical elements introduced in the 1940s into the 1990s.¹³

Rather than a move away from central free jazz musical practices, the genre and style-crossing work made after 1967 by Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Don Cherry, the Instant Composers Pool, and many others represents the freedom to explore a variety of materials and systems: free jazz as a metamusic. Free jazz is not inherently or essentially freeform; there are free jazz pieces that are completely written out, as well as those that are entirely improvised, and everything in-between. It is not a single identifiable style but includes multiple expansions of the form and language of jazz. Joe Morris described this as “freedom to” do new things rather than “freedom from” old things, and Amiri Baraka wrote that the “free” in “free jazz” is a verb, not an adjective.¹⁴

Chapter Overviews

The key earlier overviews of free jazz—Val Wilmer's *As Serious as Your Life*, John Litweiler's *The Freedom Principle*, and Ekkehard Jost's *Free Jazz*—are all organized chronologically and focused on a core group of major artists. Wilmer was a music journalist and photographer; her book relies on her firsthand experiences in New York and England and interviews she conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. Litweiler similarly built his career as a jazz journalist as one of the first to cover the AACM in the 1960s, while Jost's book is primarily technical musical analysis.¹⁵

This book takes a different approach. Each chapter covers one formal and aesthetic area opened by free jazz: new ways that people started playing music and why. These are not necessarily subgenres or schools of free jazz playing; few pieces or artists will fall neatly into one chapter. Instead, these are some of the things that were new about the music called the New Thing. Examples are often chosen because they help illustrate these things, not because they were the first or are the best. The artists and pieces discussed represent sources and limits of these formal and aesthetic innovations, not a canon of free jazz. There is no discography or recommended listening list at the end of this book. The goal is to suggest things to listen for rather than what to listen to.

Chapter 1 is on “time, no changes” playing: music that keeps the texture and feeling of bebop but suspends or eliminates chord changes or song form, introduced on the series of extremely influential albums Ornette Coleman made for Atlantic Records between 1959 and 1961. In this period of Coleman’s music, during both the themes and solos, the horns often play angular eighth note lines while the bass walks and the drums play swinging time, as in bebop. Sometimes the ensemble maintains a regular form without allowing it to dictate what is played. Coleman in particular seems to pour improvised melody into space rather than connecting harmonic landmarks. They also play compositions where, after the initial melody, the bass and drums play time without a set form, choosing pitches and defining phrases spontaneously in relation to the soloist. This approach was adopted by numerous free jazz groups as well as by bands not often considered part of the movement, such as Miles Davis’s Second Great Quintet and Keith Jarrett’s American Quartet.

Chapter 2 is on what has become known as spiritual jazz, a term popularized by writers, fans, record collectors, DJs, and concert presenters to describe some of the music growing out of John Coltrane’s work between 1960 and 1965. Coltrane’s hit 1960 adaptation of “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music* suggested both India, by reducing the harmonic movement to a cued change of mode on the same tonic, and Africa, by replacing the original straight waltz feel with a three-over-two polyrhythm. Subsequent pieces, including “Olé,” “Africa,” and “India” (all recorded in 1961), explicitly connected modal improvisation with exotic settings, while those such as “Spiritual” (1961), “Alabama” (1963), *A Love Supreme* (1964), and *Om* (1965) increasingly approached music as a religious practice. This was at odds with jazz’s association with nightlife but suited the spiritual explorations of the emerging counterculture. After John Coltrane’s death in 1967, his bandmates Pharoah Sanders and Alice Coltrane (also his widow) became leading exponents of this style. Their work often used repeated bass lines outlining simple chord progressions and found affinities in psychedelic and progressive rock, rhythm and blues, and early jazz/rock.

Chapter 3 covers energy music, exemplified by Albert Ayler’s 1965 piece “Holy Ghost,” with Sunny Murray on drums. Murray and other free jazz drummers moved away from playing countable time, marking beats or bar lines, or expressing other expected rhythmic elements. The music is propelled instead by waves of intensity, with each player keeping their contribution moving ahead on its own and in relation to others’ rather

than to a rhythmic pulse or grid. This can sound like everyone is soloing at once, and there is often a maximalist sensibility in energy music: louder, higher, faster. German bassist Peter Kowald used the term “*kaputtspiel*” to describe a music that seeks to “tear apart the old values” through sheer sonic force, but players and critics also associated the force of this music with spiritual ecstasy.¹⁶ Mid-to-late 1960s recordings such as John Coltrane’s *Ascension*, Peter Brötzmann’s *Machine Gun*, and Mashiko Togashi’s *We Now Create* illustrate some of the expressive range of energy music: religious possession, political militancy, and defiant assertion of identity.

Chapter 4 addresses experimentalism. This includes completely improvised music, which interprets the freedom of free jazz as freedom from any precomposed material or predetermined structures. Sam Rivers’s groups of the 1970 embraced episodes of harmonic stability, rhythmic groove, and references to other musical styles during their improvised sets, while others, especially the network of British groups around the Little Theatre Club, rigorously avoided these elements.

Freedom from established systems, forms, and values also permitted artists to explore new ways of structuring performances, including graphic and text notation, alternative systems of pitch and rhythmic organization, conducting and cuing techniques, and unorthodox uses of conventionally scored material. Examples of these approaches are drawn from the work of Cecil Taylor, Wadada Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Lawrence “Butch” Morris, and John Stevens.

The politics and economics of free jazz are considered in chapter 5. Writing in the first half of the 1960s, Amiri Baraka called Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane “assassins” out to “completely destroy the popular song.”¹⁷ He and other critics aligned free jazz with other liberation and self-determination movements. Leaving song form meant leaving American mass culture and the culture industry to create an autonomous art music without vestigial Tin Pan Alley and Broadway material. Many artists also sought control of their recordings and live performances. Independent and artist-run record labels and performance venues multiplied both out of necessity, as commercial platforms turned away from this music, and as alternatives to white supremacist cultural and economic systems. Free jazz was a significant element of the Black Arts Movement of the mid-1960s to 1970s. Many free jazz musicians also pursued alternative ways to produce and present work, because, unlike the classical avant-garde, this music developed largely without academic, foundation, or government support.¹⁸ Some solutions, such as staging performances in lofts and other

nontraditional spaces and developing new networks for booking shows and distributing self-produced recordings, were models for subsequent underground and DIY music scenes.¹⁹ More recently, free jazz artists have received major grants, awards, and academic appointments.

The conclusion is entitled “Ancient to the Future,” after the motto of the AACM. It considers free jazz’s role in jazz history through two pieces: the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s 1969 recording of saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell’s “A Jackson in Your House” and Julius Hemphill’s 1972 “Dogon A.D.” The first represents free jazz incorporating the existing history of jazz, with self-aware references to past styles and materials, while the second represents the innovations of free jazz becoming part of a new common practice.

“A Jackson in Your House” is a short tonal melody. The band plays it several times, sometimes pausing for spoken passages and sound effects. Each repetition uses a different combination of interpretive and improvisational approaches, from quasi-classical to New Orleans to a section featuring metal chimes, bells, and bowls. Here the freedom of free jazz includes the freedom to play in or with historical styles. While improvisers like Charlie Parker and Dexter Gordon regularly quoted phrases from classical warhorses and popular songs in their solos, it was quite rare for jazz musicians to make substantial historical and stylistic references in their work. The other half of the AACM’s motto is “Great Black Music”; their references are about claiming a history and a context as well as commenting on the past. Like Archie Shepp’s late 1960s albums *The Cry of My People* and *Attica Blues*, Carla Bley’s *Escalator Over the Hill*, Sun Ra’s performances, and Don Cherry’s work on albums including *Mu*, *Eternal Rhythm*, *Relativity Suite*, and *Actions*, the Art Ensemble often presented a panoply of musical forms, genres, and styles in the context of free jazz.²⁰

Saxophonist Julius Hemphill’s “Dogon A.D.” alternates funky and angular melodic phrases over an odd-meter blues riff. The title refers to the West African Dogon people, and “A.D.” their adapted dance, which revised ceremonial movements into formats more suitable for tourists by borrowing from European dance and by intentionally suppressing their most profound elements. Hemphill first recorded it in 1972, with a rough-edged quartet from St. Louis’s Black Artists Group, including trumpet, cello, and drums.²¹ He returned to it in 1984, on the LP *Georgia Blue*, joined by percussionist Jumma Santos and three young white musicians from Los Angeles: bass guitarist Stuart Liebzig and twin brothers Alex and Nels Cline on drums and guitar, respectively. They had absorbed John

Coltrane and the Art Ensemble alongside Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra and brought techniques and technologies of progressive and psychedelic rock to Hemphill's music. In 2009, Vijay Iyer released a version of "Dogon A.D." by his piano trio, whose repertoire included many odd-meter vamp pieces related to Indian music, and another cover appeared in 2019 by the free jazz repertory ensemble Broken Shadows, which combines saxophonists Tim Berne (a student of Hemphill's) and Chris Speed with the bassist and drummer from the Bad Plus, a piano trio whose notorious adaptations of songs by Black Sabbath and Nirvana helped build an audience for their rock-influenced original music.

These and several other versions of "Dogon A.D." suggest how ideas from free jazz have become part of a hybridized contemporary jazz mainstream. Artists like Nels Cline, Vijay Iyer, Tim Berne, Chris Speed, and the Bad Plus, as well as Ambrose Akinmusire, Dave Douglas, Kamasi Washington, Joe Lovano, Chris Potter, Mark Turner, Jason Moran, Craig Taborn, Matt Mitchell, Eric Revis, Dave Holland, Myra Melford, Dan Weiss, Tyshawn Sorey, Mary Halvorson, Bill Frisell, Ken Vandermark, Miguel Zenón, Nicole Mitchell, Joe Morris, Kris Davis, Steve Lehman, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Matana Roberts, Marc Ribot, Medeski, Martin, and Wood, John Zorn, and many others now regularly headline festivals and win awards with work that mixes traditional jazz practices with the expanded options associated with free jazz, including elements of non-Western music and contemporary classical composition as well as aspects of hip-hop, rock, and other popular genres.