ELECTROACOUSTIC, CREATIVE, AND JAZZ: MUSICIANS NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT
Throughout its history, electroacoustic music has viewed itself as distinct from what are perceived as popular musical forms. This is problematic because a parallel experimental musical universe has existed within jazz and other African-American musical traditions. This presentation explores collaborations between electroacoustic and jazz musicians during the 1960s and early 1970s, through the lens of the personal experiences of members of Herbie Hancock’s “Mwandishi” band, and of electroacoustic musicians including Richard Teitelbaum and Gordon Mumma. The discussion interrelates racial and musical segregation, and argues for the inclusion of jazz and “creative music” forms within the domain of electroacoustic music.

1. INTRODUCTION
The history of electroacoustic music is often described as an offspring of Euro-American Art music. The present author’s previous writings have sought to recast this history in a more international, culturally specific manner. Within the United States, one consequence of the conventionally drawn line of descent is the separation of electronic music from other experimentalist traditions, particularly African-American. George Lewis (Lewis 1996) has observed that electronic music in fact evolved in parallel with, and at times has been informed by African-American musical traditions, jazz in particular. This should not be surprising since jazz, an inherently improvisational art form, has historically provided fertile ground for exploration in response to new social, political and musical ideas.

I use the term “jazz” advisedly because some have viewed it as a means of limiting and segregating black musicians from the breadth of the fullness of all musical practices. I use it here for its usefulness as a concise term, albeit with some caution. This paper explores examples where musicians have crossed boundaries and engaged in collaborations between the jazz world and electronic music.

2. ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC IN JAZZ
The free jazz, aka creative music aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s in particular reflected great openness to new musical ideas, while remaining grounded in earlier traditions. That movement “… reflected an African-American tendency to enrich artistic expression with the sonic textures of everyday life … [in this case] through the arcane language of modernist concert music …In short, free jazz had achieved a tenuous balance between black vernacularism and radical change.” (Radano, 1994)

Especially worthy of note in this regard is the work of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in Chicago and, after 1980, New York, and most relevant to a discussion of connections between jazz and electronic music, pianist and multi-instrumentalist Muhal Richard Abrams, saxophonist Anthony Braxton, violinist Leroy Jenkins, and trombonist George Lewis (Lewis 1996, 2002, 2008). Other musicians with related sensibilities have included Marion Brown, Oliver Lake, Joe McPhee, and Don Cherry.

All of these people, with the addition of Herbie Hancock, whose early 1970s “Mwandishi” sextet defies Hancock’s popular image as a more mainstream jazz musician, have engaged in collaborations with electronic musicians: Braxton with Richard Teitelbaum, David Rosenboom, Gordon Mumma and, in the context of MEV, the anarchic, collectivist live electronic ensemble Music Electronica Viva, Alvin Curran; Leroy Jenkins with Richard Teitelbaum and Joel Chadabe; George Lewis with Richard Teitelbaum and others; Marion Brown with Elliot Schwartz; Don Cherry with Jon Appleton; Steve Lacy with MEV; Joe McPhee with John Snyder and later, Pauline Oliveros; Oliver Lake with Ivan Pequeno; and Herbie Hancock with Patrick Gleeson. George Lewis (Lewis 2000) and Muhal Richard Abrams engaged their own electronics within their work. Teitelbaum has also collaborated with AACM trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell, as well as a number of important jazz musicians including Andrew Cyrille, Lee Konitz, Joe McPhee, Marilyn Crispell, and Jimmy Garrison.

The incorporation of electronics in jazz, in the form of electric or electronic instruments, actually predates the AACM. Pianist Sun Ra, whose creative work in Chicago
preceded the founding of the AACM, performed with the electric piano as early as 1956, the Clavioline, an early electronic keyboard instrument in 1965, and by 1970, with Mini Moog synthesizers. Sun Ra preferred not to be associated with the “avant-garde,” a distinction lost on most who have listened to his bands during these periods. His recorded electric piano work was the first in a jazz setting, a decade before the instrument appeared in the music of Josef Zawinul and subsequently within the context of Miles Davis’ late 1960s quintet, Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. During this same period, Eddie Harris explored the use of electronics with his saxophone using the Selmer Varitone, which added reverberation and octave doubling. The work of Muhal Richard Abrams, a co-founder of the AACM, and a student of electronic music at Governors State University in Chicago with RichardMcCready in 1973, was a model closer to electroacoustic music. Abrams had already begun to explore aspects of electronic music in his first recording, ‘Levels and Degrees of Light’ (Abrams 1967). In this series of compositions scored for acoustical instruments and voice, Abrams uses subtly shifting amounts and depths of reverberation to suggest changing aspects of light. Electronics have remained a significant element in his work ever since.

The music of George Lewis, a younger AACM colleague of Abrams, intensely straddles jazz and live electronics. Lewis describes his composition/computer program ‘Voyager’ (1985-1993) as “a nonhierarchical, interactive musical environment that privileges improvisation.” (Lewis 2000) The Voyager computer program consists of multiple improvising players that can combine to create ensembles. The character of those players is determined by generative algorithms within the software, or influenced by human players whose improvisations are being analyzed by the computer. There results can be multi-layered, melodically complex, varied in timbre, simultaneously multi-rhythmic and arrhythmic, and intentionally unpredictable. A performance of ‘Voyager’ is aesthetically in keeping with Robert L. Douglas’ description of Afrological culture as “multidominant,” “the multiple use of colors in intense degrees, or the multiple use of textures, design patterns, or shapes.” (Douglas 1991, cited in Lewis 2000) A 2005 collaboration between George Lewis, Muhal Richard Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell, “Streaming,” incorporates Lewis’s more recent work engaging electronics within an improvisatory musical fabric. (Abrams, Lewis and Mitchell 2006)

In a more popular music vein is Charles Stepney’s musical arranging and studio-based production work at Chess Records. Stepney’s best known work, with the psychedelic band Rotary Connection, utilizes numerous creative approaches to sound design, influenced, he observed, by ideas about timbre from Henry Cowell. One poignant example is found throughout his work, where Stepney treats singer Minnie Riperton’s five-octave vocal range like a wailing Theremin. One example is their 1969 cover of the song ‘Sunshine of Your Love’.

3. MUSICIANS NAVIGATING RACE

It is common for African-American and other jazz musicians to have studied European classical music. It is less common for classical musicians to have exposure to or training in non-European musical traditions. Herbie Hancock recalls that during the late 1960s: “I was listening to Trane [John Coltrane] and Ornette and, of course, the stuff with Miles [Davis] and Gil Evans had of course always been interesting to me. And I was listening to some contemporary classical composers, too, like Messiaen and Debussy, and Stravinsky and Penderecki. Also Bartok.” In 1964, Hancock told an interviewer that he was listening to a work by John Cage and Stockhausen’s Gesang der Jünglinge, commenting: “it is fascinating. I haven’t as yet been able to absorb it into my emotional makeup. I’ve been affected by it.” (Mehegan 1964)

Two of Hancock’s Mwandishi band mates recall quite clearly their exposure to an eclectic assortment of music, including classical, early in their lives. Drummer Billy Hart: “Outside of [singer and pianist] Shirley Horn, my biggest inspiration in music is John Coltrane… My grandmother, even though I never really heard her play the piano, had been a concert pianist. So, I guess in some way through her I had gotten some knowledge about the European classical repertoire. Between that and movies; I remember being really attracted by ‘Sheherazade’ by Rimsky-Korsakov. And that was even before I knew that I liked music.” Saxophonist Bennie Maupin: “Where I was growing up in Detroit, you were automatically exposed to all that church music, blues, the beginnings of R&B and all those things that came out of Motown. Classical musicians came there; they had emigrated from Europe… great teachers ended up being there, in the unified school district of Detroit. They all played in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. It was a place to get some good training, so I kind of came up through that.”

The musical crossover between races was, however, largely unidirectional, as educator, writer and drummer Philip Royster observes about Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s: “Audiences were rigidly segregated, with dominant whites having access to black clubs, but not vice versa. White musicians visited black nightspots in order to listen to and transcribe what they were hearing.” Parallel issues existed in New York City’s clubs. For some white musicians, the discovery of jazz was a revelation and involved maybe a degree of intrigue and behavior considered by some to be transgressive.

Gordon Mumma: “I followed the growth of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Coleman, Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and company. The closer to the “edge” the more I was interested in their artistic
virtuosity. I still carry awe and admiration for those in the 1940s and earlier... In the 1950s one of my college roommates, a black jazz trombonist, introduced me to much of the still "underground." There was much cultural and intellectual intermingling following the 2nd World War, and that was part of the momentum that pushed the United States governments to gradually remove the laws that enforced segregation. That was also a complicated time because it was illegal for people of different color to share the same living quarters, and my parents received notice of my violation of the law. That law was in the state of Michigan where College and University housing was segregated. The concert band I performed with had to leave the colored people [the term used at that time] home when we toured to other states that prohibited people of different color from performing on stage together. Even the recording companies, e.g. RCA, had separate catalogues and stores that segregated "race music"... My use of the term "underground" is fairly wide, but it served as a cover-word for places "one wasn't supposed to go," for example south of Detroit's 9-mile Road was where I traveled to the stores that sold "race records". It was still discouraged, and uncommon, for a white guy to go there, but I was accompanied by a black friend.”

Richard Teitelbaum: “I first listened to jazz recordings in high school, and I heard Louis Armstrong perform at the Paramount Theater in New York and it blew me away. I was in the back row of the balcony and his first note was the loudest thing I ever heard. [During college] my main interests were Stravinsky and Bartok. And then I started getting interested in Schoenberg and Webern, more in graduate school, and Stockhausen and jazz. I liked bebop a lot... I got really into Coltrane around 1960, and I went to hear his quartet in a club and, by chance, during a recording session at A&R Studios. Steve Lacy took me to hear him several times during the period of ‘Ascension’... And then I also was getting involved with free jazz, including Albert Ayler. When I got to Italy, I was still writing instrumental music, but I was hanging out with Steve Lacy, Don Cherry, Karl Berger, Gato Barbieri and Ornette Coleman and listening to more jazz than classical or electronic music. I was really quite obsessed with the notion that noise was something shared in common between the jazz of that period and noise music, electronic music. So I had a very conscious awareness of the connection between improvised music, free improvised music and electronic music.”

Given the depth of social, political and cultural segregation in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, it is notable that interracial collaborations between jazz and electronic musicians indeed took place. Gordon Mumma believes that connections between people within particular musical circles was “for me more social-cultural rather than artistic-stylistic. They were clusters of individuals that grew larger in their achievements because they worked and played together. For most, their individual "origins" made no or little difference, black or white, jazz or classical, street people or academics, electronic or acoustic. Whatever.” Speaking more generally about musical associations in New York City during the 1960s and 70s, Joel Chadabe considers these to have been often based on “personal friendships and artist affinities; and very often, personal friendships were based on artist affinities, and certainly, different kinds of personalities with different kinds of goals.”
It is fair to say that personal friendships, supported by artistic commonalities, were at the center of many of the collaborations between jazz and electronic musicians. Anthony Braxton’s friendship with Richard Teitelbaum happened by chance, but resulted in an association that has continued for decades. Teitelbaum recalls: “I met Braxton in 1969 in a cow pasture in Belgium, in a place called Amougies, a big festival that was one of the original attempts to bring jazz, mostly rock but some free jazz and a few wacky token electronic avant-garde types to play in the same festival. Braxton played there with his trio with Leroy Jenkins and Wadada Leo Smith. The Art Ensemble of Chicago played there. It was an extraordinary performance and the first time I heard them and met them. MEV was part of that. [Before then] I had barely known anything about any of the AACM guys.” By this time, Braxton’s musical interests included Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage as well as jazz. After returning from a year in Paris in 1970, Braxton began to tour with MEV.

Gordon Mumma first met AACM members in March 1965, “when Robert Ashley and I, along with Peter Yates, gave a concert and lecture series at the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University... From the late 1960s and 1970s "jazz" oriented artists I connected with included Braxton, Jenkins, Lacy, Lewis, etc. Braxton became a particularly good friend, and I recall that we first met when he was visiting a rehearsal of the Merce Cunningham Dance Co. Our interconnections went on from there. The connections keep growing; in the past few years I have met with the extraordinary Roscoe Mitchell, who now is on the faculty at Mills College, and was one of the earliest organizers of the AACM. Of my connections with the "jazz" oriented performers during the 1960s and 1970s, I'd say that it was Braxton who became my closest connection and friend. Braxton in a sense doesn't fit in any category; he's too universal, open minded and evolutionary in his innovative creative work.”

Braxton was one of the participants, along with Gordon Mumma, David Behrman, Leroy Jenkins, and artist Robert Watts, in their 1970 collaborative multimedia work ‘Communication in a Noisy Environment.’ Placed separately on three different floors of Automation House in New York and interconnected by televisions and loudspeakers, the musicians played an eclectic assortment of instruments amidst a dizzying array of projected images and objects. The New York Times reported that: “The planned chaos of image and sound was gradually raised to a level at which communication was impossible.” (Ericson 1970)

The evolution of electronics in Herbie Hancock’s “Mwandishi” band (1970-1973) unfolded in a different way. Hancock was the leader of a relatively lyrical ensemble founded in 1969, after departing from the Miles Davis Quintet. Hancock recalls the evolution towards a more exploratory style of playing: “[At first] it really wasn’t that avant-garde Mwandishi sound. It really started out with me playing ‘Speak Like a Child’ and songs from that record. And it was a much softer, more gentle kind of
sound. I was trying to come out of a Gil Evans influence, that combination of instruments, those arrangements. When we were playing that more gentle kind of music in the beginning, the avant-garde was having a bigger and bigger influence on many of the more curious jazz musicians, more mainstream post-bop players or whatever you want to call that, and with me too. So the band I had was getting further and further out. We were playing those arrangements, but after we’d leave the head, the playing was getting further and further out by the time I’d made some changes in personnel of the band…. When the personnel changed, there was a whole new spiritual feeling with the band that expanded the playing, opened the veins of the lifeblood of the playing of the band, into more intuitive playing than had happened with the previous band. I think we started in something like September or October 1970. We got this gig at London House [in Chicago]. We were already into the avant-garde, into playing sounds and exploring new sonic territories. London House had traditionally been a club that had piano trios there.” Trumpeter Eddie Henderson recalls that the regular audience ceased attending and were replaced in even larger numbers by members of the most exploratory Chicago jazz musicians, a number of them connected with the AACM. After this point, trombonist Julian Priester remembers: “There were no restrictions … everyone was listening to each other, leaving our egos out of the process, just responding to what the overall group invents.”

Hancock’s sound was also becoming increasingly electric as an Echoplex and other devices gradually became an integral extension of his electric piano playing. Working in San Francisco, producer David Rubinson introduced the pianist to the wide range of post-production studio techniques that he had developed as a producer of psychedelic rock bands, in particular the United States of America and the Chambers Brothers, and by listening to music from the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center while working at Columbia Records in New York City. With the help of engineer Fred Catera, Rubinson and Hancock integrated echo and tape feedback into band members’ increasingly abstract studio performances, for example, Billy Hart’s already dense and shimmering gestures on the drum kit. (Hancock 1971)

Rubinson also sought to engage Herbie Hancock fully in the studio production, a shift away from standard practice that offered musicians little control over their own work. Rubinson recalls: “...what really happened with Herbie was that his creativity was exposed to the entire creative process of making records and making music. He was insightful and he just opened up like a flower ... and expressed himself in the whole process ... It increased his palette of colors and effects.” Time magazine opined: “Miles Davis protégé Herbie Hancock shows what jazz might have sounded like if it had come up the river from Darmstadt, that European mecca of the avant garde, instead of New Orleans.” (Time 1972)

The Mwandishi band more fully entered the world of electronics on their second recording, ‘Crossings’ (Hancock 1972). Hancock had expressed an interest in learning to play a synthesizer and Rubinson recommended that he visit synthesizer player and sound designer Patrick Gleeson. Gleeson had gained experience with synthesizers and tape techniques at the San Francisco Tape Music Center and while working with members of the Ann Halprin Dance Workshop in the early 1960s. He demonstrated for Hancock the kinds of interpolations one might add to the largely completed studio recordings. Hancock liked what he heard and urged Gleeson to record what he was doing on one of the compositions, ‘Quasar’, and then on a second, ‘Water Torture’, both by Bennie Maupin. The result was a highly integrated blend of acoustic and electric instrumental performances, electronic sounds, and post-production processing. Hancock subsequently invited Gleeson to join his touring band, resulting in a fuller incorporation of electronics into the band’s musical vocabulary.

Gleeson purchased an Arp 2600 synthesizer, far more portable than the Moog III in his studio, and he became the seventh member of the Herbie Hancock Mwandishi “Sextet.” He was actually the eighth member if one counts sound engineer Fundi (William Bonner), who all of the band members considered to be integral. Fundi had at his disposal a quadraphonic sound system and an Echoplex of his own, allowing him to suddenly spatialise and process everyone’s sounds, heightening the electronic feel of the music.

Incorporating synthesizer sounds into a tight-knit group of seasoned jazz players proved challenging. But as Julian Priester recalls: “By the time I had completely accepted the change, the progress, the progression of technology, that I viewed it [Patrick’s synthesizer] as an extension of what we were doing acoustically, so it fit.” For some, it expanded the pallet of sound resources, Bennie Maupin observes: “it was for me like a breath of fresh air.” And over time, Patrick Gleeson felt warmly welcomed: “[When I joined this deeply Afrocentric band] I felt like I’d gone home. I felt like I’d found my place. This is where I belong.”

Musically, Gleeson had to develop a new vocabulary of sounds and gestures appropriate to this musical setting. He created sculpted bands of white noise to back soloists and a wide range of non-pitched sounds to join in the ensemble. Herbie Hancock crafted new compositions that were keenly suited to the increasingly rhythmic drive of the band and its incorporation of new sounds. ‘Rain Dance,’ which opens the band’s third and final recording ‘Sextant’ (Hancock 1973), is a celebration of the analog synthesizer’s sequencer, a device that allowed a musician to store a series of voltages, which in this case were translated into pitched ostinati. Tape loops abounded during the studio sessions and ‘Rain Dance’ features overlapping layers of ostinati, shifting in pitch, timbre and
rhythmic complexity. Gleeson’s contribution to “Sextant” was substantial. Unfortunately, the band proved financially unsustainable and Hancock yearned for what he terms a more “earthy” music, leading him to change directions and organize the more populist and financially successful Headhunters.

6. ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

If segregationist white America tended to separate white and black musicians, as well as musical styles, there were elements within African-American culture that looked askance on the use of electronics in black music. One cultural critic (Wellburn 1971) wrote: “… [rock musicians emerged from] a technological lineage extending through John Cage, Stockhausen, Edgard Varese, all the way back to Marconi and the wireless. White rock is a technology, not a real music… black musicians should re-evaluate the technological intrusions now threatening our music; times may come when that technology will be useless. Our music is our key to survival.” And the critical response to the increasingly electronic and exploratory direction of the Mwandishi band was often very negative, particularly in the jazz periodical Down Beat. One staff writer, Harvey Siders (Siders 1972) was confused by the sounds and the open-ended improvisations. Criticism of the synthesizer in particular was harsh. Pete Welding (Welding 1972) referred to “freaky, eerie sequences of ‘spacey’ effects,” “empty, overdramatic bluster - the most obnoxious kind of speciously trippy music.” Clearly, the blurring of distinctions between jazz and electronic music was threatening to some. Yet there were others who appreciated Mwandishi’s music. Bill McLarney (McLarney 1972): “This group has gotten a lot of strange reviews - by earnest men, one supposes, with reasons for their reactions … What matters is that this music, these artists, have the ability to get you next to yourself and maybe some night, even to work a transformation – if you are ready.”

The idea of post-production was unfamiliar to many jazz musicians and, for some, of little interest. Eddie Henderson notes: “when I finished playing the last note on the record, that was it for me.” Most members of the band, in fact, seemed little interested in the recording process, having never experienced it other than as documentation. When asked to reflect about the band’s recordings, Bennie Maupin commented: “I don’t listen to those recordings. I hardly listen to any of that [what I’ve recorded]. I’m composing now.” A jazz ethic of playing in the moment seems to have pervaded the sensibilities of the Mwandishi band, although those among them who listened to the results were pleased, once they recovered from the initial shock. Although I have no specific evidence, I wonder whether playing in a band that drew so heavily on electronics was perceived as a career risk for jazz musicians. Also, prior to the 1970s, electronic instruments lacked the technical means relevant to idiomatic jazz performance, as Joel Chadabe notes: “Electronic music performance before the 1980s was practically 100% in the avant-garde, like David Tudor and Gordon Mumma, working with makeshift instruments. For the most part, it was people doing homebrew stuff [which was] very limited, so you couldn’t really play jazz with most of it, in
a conventional sense. [In the 60s] MEV started to play with a lot of odds and ends instruments and Richard Teitelbaum started to use a Moog synthesizer when they became available. So little by little, electronics started to work their way into jazz at that time.”

7. CONCLUSIONS

The collaborations between jazz and electronic musicians during the 1960s and 1970s represented an important shift away from a more musically and socially segregated musical culture. These efforts, and those of musicians like George Lewis and Muhal Richard Abrams, whose work bridges both worlds, have broadened the scope of electroacoustic music and jazz alike, expanding our collective aesthetic and historical horizons. There are clearly numerous examples that blur perceived boundaries between musical idioms, calling into question the solidity of these divisions. However, points of contact and aesthetic consonance remain rare, thus reinforcing the perception that African-American musical traditions and electroacoustic music are neither in dialog nor open to interrelationship.

It would be of value to electroacoustic and computer music to embrace the historical points of contact that in truth belong to the legacy and repertoire of the field. It is equally important to reflect upon and to criticize the assumptions and self definitions that have kept these two traditions apart, not in fact, where artists from both traditions have fruitfully collaborated, but in the sometimes parochial practice of two critical theories, electroacoustic music and jazz, that has reinforced and maintained this fictitious division.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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9. REFERENCES

Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were by the author, including: Fred Catera (March 1, 2008); Joel Chadabe (December 8, 2008); Patrick Gleeson (on several occasions, October 2007 - January 2008 and May - July 2008); Billy Hart (June 17, 2008); Herbie Hancock (December 19, 2008); Eddie Henderson (March 29, 2008); Bennie Maupin (January 7, 2008); Gordon Mumma (Dec. 5 and 7, 2008); David Rubinson (January 29, 2008); Richard Teitelbaum (April 12, 2008); Buster Williams (February 23 and July 3, 2008). Email consultation with George Lewis (September 16, 2007 and March 26, 2008).

[1] Abrams, M. R. “Levels and Degrees of Light,” Delmark (LP). The composer told me that the reverberation was removed from a recent CD re-release, an element that he considers to be an integral aspect of the composition. 1967.


