

Art music, jazz, race, and experimentalism: negotiating perceived boundaries

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Abstract

Electro-acoustic music has historically been viewed as exclusively an outgrowth of European aesthetics and technologies. This paper considers some of the obstacles that prevented music that crossed boundaries between electro-acoustic music and jazz, a musical tradition that emerged from African-American roots. Examples of boundary crossing are explored, with a focus on the Anthony Braxton - Richard Teitelbaum duets and Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi band of the early 1970s. Such collaborations challenge the notion that the two traditions have always been racial and aesthetically segregated from one another and suggest the possibilities for further creative endeavors.

Broadening the scope of a historic field

The history of electro-acoustic music is often described as exclusively an offspring of Euro-American Art music. My previous writings have sought to recast this history in a more internationalist, culturally specific manner. A broader perspective¹ finds compositional developments as early as 1944 in Cairo, when Halim El-Dabh conducted compositional experiments with a wire recorder. As early as 1953, composers began exploring sounds on tape, among them Juan Amenabar and José Vicente Asuar in Chile, Mauricio Kagel in Argentina, and Toshiro Mayuzumi in Japan. In 1956, Reginaldo Carvalho in Brazil and Toru Takemitsu in Japan began similar efforts. By the early 1960s, electro-acoustic music composers were working in Cuba, Australia, Uruguay, Bolivia, Israel and Mexico. Early studios opened their doors in 1950s Tokyo and Buenos Aires, 1960s Jerusalem, 1970s Indonesia and 1980s China and South Korea. Were it not for political problems, a studio would have opened in Istanbul in 1962. Those who lacked technical resources traveled to Western studios, such as the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center, beginning in the late 1950s², some subsequently returning home to continue their efforts. Indonesian composer Slamet Abdur Sjukur (1963) and Iranian composer Alireza Mashayekhi (1965) composed in European studios.

Equally important for the purpose of this paper, composers, particularly in the 1970s, began to draw upon musical resources and sounds from their cultures of origin^{3 4}. Their precursor is Halim el-Dabh's 'Leiyla and the Poet' (1959), composed at Columbia Princeton. Among the most interesting works of the 1970s are Alberto Villalpando's 'Bolivianos...!' (Bolivia, 1973), Ricardo Teruel's 'Cultura Vegeta' (Venezuela, 1976), and Joaquin Orellana's 'Humanofonia' (Guatemala, 1971). Subsequent examples of electronic works that include culturally specific elements were composed in the 1980s and 90s by Chinese composers Yuanlin Chen and Dajuin Yao, Persian-American composers Shahrokh Yadegari and Darius Dolat-shahi, Jewish-American composers Richard Teitelbaum, Alvin Curran and Robert Gluck, Koreans Don Oung Lee, Sung Ho Hwang and Jin Hi Kim, Peruvian-Israeli composer Rajmil Fischman (active in the United Kingdom) and Israeli composer Avi Elbaz,

whose work is influenced by his Moroccan origins.⁵

Jazz, race, and perceived boundaries

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^{6 7} has observed that electronic music in fact evolved in parallel with, and at times 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. Nonetheless, as Lewis has shown, a search of the literature suggests that the term experimentalism has been rarely applied to black musicians, and electronic music histories rarely if ever refer to jazz musicians. The musical programming at academic electro-acoustic music conferences and festivals appears to include very few works that move outside of Euro-American musical aesthetics in general, or include black musical aesthetics in particular.

However, when one looks back to the 1970s, the period when boundaries between electro-acoustic music and jazz were first being actively crossed, one finds an anti-technological line drawn in the sand by jazz and African-American writers. During this period, some African-American cultural theorists and jazz critics considered the use of electronic technologies to be a threat to the authenticity of jazz and to the survival of black culture.

In a 1971 essay, poet Ron Wellburn expressed the concern that technology might undermine the survival of black communities. Wellburn called upon black musicians to play an activist role in building a sustainable culture, but he suggested that to do so, musicians must resist the use of technology and thus separate themselves from white rock musicians, who: "... [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..."⁸ It is unclear whether Wellburn felt similarly about the vital and more broadly popular electric music of black musicians Sly Stone and Miles Davis.

Two of the landmark recordings of early 1970s electric jazz were sharply criticized in the jazz press. Reviewers suggested that the weakness of these recordings were connected to their usage of technology. Gary Giddins⁹ sharply criticized Weather Report's 'I Sing the Body Electric' (1972): "... There is a certain amount of the flow and freedom characteristic of jazz, but the total effect is more like the electronic machination of [Morton] Subotnick or the space flights of [Giorgi] Ligeti..." Giddins connected musically effective moments in the composition 'Unknown Soldier' to their "minimal studio gimmickry." In a similar vein, Pete Welding¹⁰ wrote that the Herbie Hancock Sextet recording 'Crossings' (1972) displayed a "lack of any feeling of flow or inevitability; nor is there much in the way of true rapport among the players ... with freaky, eerie sequences of 'spacey' effects laid into a matrix of lush Les Baxter-like exotica ... plenty of empty, overdramatic bluster - the most obnoxious kind of speciously trippy music ... The less said about the synthesizer effects, the better."

It is my purpose in this paper to explore examples where American musicians have crossed boundaries and collaborated between the jazz world and electronic music, despite perceived aesthetic and other conflicts. European examples merit their own separate treatment. I will also note some of the historical, aesthetic, and cultural reasons for this perception of disconnection. Much of my research is based upon interviews conducted with musicians.

A broader history than generally acknowledged

The incorporation of electronics in jazz, in the form of electric or electronic instruments, dates as early as 1963, when pianist Sun Ra performed with the Clavioline, and by 1970, with Mini Moog synthesizers. Sun Ra was also the first to play electric piano, in 1956, a decade before it appeared in the work of Josef Zawinul and subsequently, 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. Along a model closer to electro-acoustic music, Muhal Richard Abrams, a co-founder of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM) began to explore aspects of electronic music in his first recording, "Levels and Degrees of Light" (1967). Abrams, like his younger colleague, trombonist George Lewis, has in subsequent years, continued to create work that incorporates his own electronic musical elements. An important expression of Lewis's work as a computer musician is 'Voyager' (1985-1993)¹¹, a computer program that simulates improvising players with their own distinct personalities. These algorithmically generated improvisers are both influenced by and can influence the performance of human partners.

Prominent AACM-affiliated musicians and others within the free jazz movements in New York and elsewhere have also engaged in collaborations with electronic musicians. Among them are saxophonists Anthony Braxton, Marion Brown, Oliver Lake, Joe McPhee, and Roscoe Mitchell, trumpeters Wadada Leo Smith and Don Cherry, violinist Leroy Jenkins, and trombonist George Lewis. Many of their collaborators have been white and academically trained musicians. Among these are Richard Teitelbaum, David Rosenboom, Gordon Mumma, Joel Chadabe, Elliot Schwartz, Jon Appleton, Pauline Oliveros, and in the context of the anarchic, collectivist live electronic ensemble Music Electronica Viva (MEV), Alvin Curran and Frederic Rzewski (along with Teitelbaum).¹² Soprano saxophone pioneer Steve Lacy also performed with MEV and individually with Teitelbaum, including Lacy's 'Chinese Food for LBJ', for voice, sax, and electronics, a 1967 work about the War in Vietnam.¹³ These collaborations often arose through personal connections, friendships, and mutual interests. One of the most fascinating collaborations took place in the early 1970s, between Herbie Hancock and Patrick Gleeson in the context of Hancock's "Mwandishi" Sextet.

The existence of these collaborations should not be surprising. It is common for jazz musicians to have studied European classical and avant-garde Art music. This was the case for Herbie Hancock, who told an interviewer, as early as 1964, that he was listening to a work by John Cage and Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jungling*, commenting: "it is fascinating. I haven't as yet been able to absorb it into my emotional makeup. I've been affected by it." During his childhood, Hancock trained as a classical pianist and performed a Mozart concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and was exposed to the music of Olivier Messiaen and Edgard Varese while in college. Several members of Hancock's "Mwandishi" band also studied or were exposed to classical music in a serious manner.

In turn, a number of the important pioneers of live electronic music, for example, Gordon Mumma, Richard Teitelbaum, and Patrick Gleeson found jazz in all its forms to be an important influence.¹⁴ Gordon Mumma recalls: "I followed the growth of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Coleman, Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and company... In the 1950s one of my college roommates, a black jazz trombonist, introduced me to much of the still "underground ... 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." One of Mumma's musical

projects during the early 1970s was 'Communication in a Noisy Environment, realized in collaboration with Anthony Braxton, fellow AACM member and violinist Leroy Jenkins, electronic musician David Behrman, and visual artist Robert Watts.

Patrick Gleeson relates: "My best [high school] friend, Jeff and I fell in love with jazz to a degree we didn't even understand. I think in high school this was a well-kept secret... [we] would hole up in his family den and listen to Benny Goodman, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, etc., and then, as puberty approached we began standing outside the doors of clubs in the "colored district," until someone taking the door would let us in, warning us, more often than not, that "I had nothing to do with this, and you just go in, go to the back, and sit down!"

Richard Teitelbaum remembers: "When I got to Venice [Italy], I was still writing instrumental music, but I was hanging out with Steve Lacy, Don Cherry and others, including 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, like Coltrane's 'Ascension' and noise music, electronic music. So I had a very conscious awareness of the connection between improvised music, free improvised music and electronic music."

As a young musician, Anthony Braxton was a fan of rock and rock. He became interested in jazz as a teenager. His time in the Army stationed in Korea was pivotal to his musical development. It was during those years that Braxton discovered the music of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, and also Arnold Schoenberg, particularly his 'Drei Klavierstücke' for piano, Opus 11. He read the writings of John Cage after returning home to Chicago, joined the AACM, and recorded his groundbreaking solo saxophone work "For Alto" (1968). In 1969, he met Richard Teitelbaum and the following year, began to tour with Teitelbaum's group, MEV. Teitelbaum recalls their meeting "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." Braxton subsequently toured with MEV, as did saxophonist Steve Lacy.

A closer look at a collaborative project: Anthony Braxton and Richard Teitelbaum

To understand the nature of the Braxton-Teitelbaum duo, let's take a close look at a portion of one of their duet performances. The composition is Teitelbaum's 'Crossing', which was recorded on June 10, 1976, at a concert at the Creative Music Festival, in Mt. Temper, New York.¹⁵ I will track here the first eleven minutes of the twenty-four and a half minute performance.

Braxton opens 'Crossing' with an angular, declarative melodic saxophone improvisation, joined by Teitelbaum's quiet, relatively static melody on synthesizer. The timbre of the Moog synthesizer is reminiscent of a recorder with slight vibrato. The tone quality shifts to a more electronic timbre at 0:30, its higher pitched notes rapidly repeated. Teitelbaum gives way to a Braxton play solo at 1:10. The very quiet synthesizer reappears very briefly at 1:50 and at 2:15 presents a legato line counter melody, which continues alone at 2:20. After 3:00, the pitch spread of the solo synthesizer grows dramatically, the line becoming more pointillistic and at times polyphonic. Braxton quietly rejoins the fray, subtly matching and varying Teitelbaum's pitches and timbre. The emotional tone becomes elegiac and the two players seem to merge into one, until at 4:40, Braxton moves to the foreground.

Around 5:00, the saxophone melody becomes more lyrical, and at 5:15, rapid trills are introduced as thematic elements. Teitelbaum imitates Braxton's trills with various electronic timbres, sometimes in the upper reaches of the synthesizer's register. The two engage in a *pas de deux*. After a brief pause at 6:15, Braxton begins to play rapid and sharply angular lines, adding more noise elements into his sound. Teitelbaum does the same, albeit at a slower tempo. At 6:45, he introduces oscillating figures, at the perfect 5th and tritone, and then shifts to angular melodic lines which contrast with Braxton's continued rapid and even more angular motion.

At 7:09, the synthesizer takes on a more frantic feel, its sounds increasingly frequency modulated and warbling, adding in glissandi. The overall intensity of the duet increases to a frantic pace until 8:11, when Teitelbaum repeats a sustained, noisy figure. Then at 8:30, he returns to rapidly rising and falling gestures, the tone highly modulated, matching Braxton's intensity, pace, and emotional frenzy. At 9:05, Teitelbaum transitions to a more legato line, noisy in timbre, with Braxton dropping away at 9:35, leaving Teitelbaum to play two parallel lines one of which has a higher noise component. Braxton assertively returns at 10:12 with a very buzzy and low-pitched contrabass clarinet. The two engage in a spiraling dance, with Teitelbaum playing a rapid, step-wise, chromatically moving "Flight of the Bumble Bee" line against Braxton's low growls and lines that parallel Teitelbaum's step-wise motion.

The opening eleven minutes of this performance may be characterized by an alternation of solo and duet passages, most often stitched together with seamless transitions. Duets take the form of polyphonic accompaniment, merged texture, intense duels, and parallel play. Braxton opens playing solo, joined quietly by Teitelbaum. Braxton solos again at 1:10, soon joined by polyphony by Teitelbaum, who then solos at 2:20. After a short while, Braxton subtly returns and the two seem to merge into a single voice until Braxton moves to the forefront. An extended duet ensues until Teitelbaum plays alone at 9:35, offering polyphonic lines, until Braxton's assertive return at 10:12, followed by intense interplay. The work draws upon these changing dynamics to move through a series of moods, among them lyrical, elegy, and anxious.

The juxtaposition of two instruments so different in timbral possibilities, performance techniques, and of course, technology, is a challenge. The chosen strategy of this duo is to find common ground. Thus, priority is given to timbral and pitch matching, and imitation of melodic shapes, for example, angularity of line and trills. Teitelbaum's choice of synthesizer sounds is guided by the principle of narrowing the distance between the two instruments, offering contrast when there is a musical point to be made. Teitelbaum chooses timbres that contrast suggestions of acoustical instruments and more purely electronic sounds. His chosen timbres remain close to Braxton's sound palate, extending his timbral range beyond Braxton's in subtle ways, with frequency modulation, sometimes suggestive of vibrato, and sometimes to introduce noise elements into the sound. Braxton, in turn, ranges between lyrical sounds that are characteristic of the higher pitched saxophones, and sounds, such as growls, with more noise elements. He turns to the contrabass clarinet when it is musically useful to extend his range of registers and craft sounds that imitate electronic timbres, such as sounds, like buzzes, with high levels of noise elements.

The balance of the performance, and the second composition included on the recording (from a different session), moves into a different set of emotional spaces than the first half and it draws upon a distinct set of timbres. At times part two shows greater emphasis on contrast and use of foreground-background than in the first section. Nonetheless, the basic dynamics between the two performers generally follow principles similar to those described below in their search for common ground, based in nuanced and sympathetic listening.

Herbie Hancock and the Mwandishi Band

Herbie Hancock's "Mwandishi" band (1970-1973) began as a relatively lyrical ensemble founded in 1969, evolved into a more exploratory style of playing, as "the avant-garde was having a bigger and bigger influence on many of the more curious jazz musicians, more mainstream post-bebop players or whatever you want to call that, and with me too." Gradually, and after changes in personnel, trombonist Julian Priester recalls: "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 and 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, and by listening to music from the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, while working at Columbia Records in New York City. *Time* magazine¹⁶ 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." The Mwandishi band more fully entered the world of electronics on their second recording, 'Crossings', which introduced synthesizer interpolations by synthesizer player and sound designer Patrick Gleeson, who 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.

Hancock subsequently invited Gleeson to join his touring band, resulting in a fuller incorporation of electronics into the band's musical vocabulary. Incorporating synthesizer sounds into a tight-knit group of seasoned jazz players proved challenging. The idea of post-production was unfamiliar to many jazz musicians and, for some, of little interest. 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."

"Jazz" as a problematic term

The use of any term, such as "jazz," that suggests a historical idiom becomes problematic in the context of boundary crossing musical forms. Why should Anthony Braxton, a composer who has worked in a wide range of musical forms and media be termed a "jazz" musician, while Richard Teitelbaum, who is generally associated with electronic music is not? Is Patrick Gleeson, whose synthesizer sounds are generally closer to the musical world of Teitelbaum than, let's say, to Charlie Parker, a "jazz" musician? Does "jazz" refer to a particular idiom, to a cluster of performance practices, or is it primarily an indicator of a musician's race? Note that many musicians affiliated with the exclusively African-American AACM have, in fact, avoided the use of the term. On the other hand, when music associated with as aesthetically varied a group of musicians as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington all find a place under the rubric of "jazz," why should this umbrella exclude the work of the Braxton-Teitelbaum or Mwandishi band? For purposes of this paper, I therefore embrace the term "jazz" and hold that it can represent a broad array of musicians and media, including electro-acoustic forms. There is no reason why this or any other term needs to be a limiting or exclusive identifier. Thus, the musicians discussed could be legitimately identified in a number of other ways as well.

Conclusions

While unknown to many and rarely discussed, 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 broaden the scope of the field of both electro-acoustic music and jazz, and expand aesthetic and historical horizons. There are clearly numerous examples that blur perceived boundaries between musical idioms, calling into question the segregation of musical cultures even within the United States. It would be of value to the fields of electro-acoustic and computer music to consider aesthetic and other assumptions that have resulted in lack of inclusion of jazz that engages electro-acoustic musical values and technologies within its canon of repertoire and aesthetic universe.

¹ Robert Gluck, "Electro-acoustic Music in a Broader International Context," *MusicWorks* 94, Winter 2006.

² Robert Gluck, "Educating International Composers: The Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center," *Computer Music Journal* 31:2, Spring 2007.

³ Robert Gluck, "Traditional Cultural Resources in Electro-acoustic Music," *Living Music Journal*, November 2006.

⁴ Robert Gluck, "Free sound within culturally specific practice," *Proceedings of the International Computer Music Conference*, Barcelona, September 2005.

⁵ A listing of my previous historical articles, including a series of brief national histories posted at the Electronic Music Foundation's EMF Institute may be found here:
http://www.electricsongs.com/gluck_topic_essays.html

⁶ George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal*, 16:1, Spring 1996.

⁷ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁸ Ron Wellburn, "The Black Aesthetic Imperative," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., New York: Doubleday, 1971.

⁹ Gary Giddins, "Weather Report: I Sing the Body Electric," *Down Beat*, October 26, 1972.

¹⁰ Pete Welding, review of "Crossings," *Down Beat*, November 23, 1972.

¹¹ George E. Lewis, "Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in Voyager," *Leonardo Music Journal* 10, 2000.

¹² Ivan Vandor, one of the early members of MEV, was also a jazz tenor saxophonist and founder of one of the first jazz bands in post-World War II Italy.

¹³ Recorded but never released on ESP. The electronics consisted of Moog modules and Teitelbaum's homemade circuits. The text was a setting of the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu.

¹⁴ Interviews were conducted by the author, including: Fred Catera (March 1, 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 from George Lewis (September 16, 2007, March 26, 2008).

¹⁵ Richard Teitelbaum and Anthony Braxton, "Time Zones," Freedom CD (Germany), 1988 (Arista LP, 1977).

¹⁶ January 3, 1972.