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Book Review

The Free Musics

Jack Wright
Spring Garden Music Editions, 2017
ISBN: 1537777246
316 pages

Reviewed by Michael Kaler

There has not exactly been a deluge of long-form writing about free improv in the sixty or so years that it's been around as a publicly practiced musical strategy, but by now we do have a modest but respectable collection of interesting and illuminative books exploring it; I'm thinking of books by Derek Bailey (*Improvisation*), Trevor Barre (*Beyond Jazz* and *Convergences, Divergences, and Affinities*), David Borgo (*Sync or Swarm*), John Corbett (*A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation*), Philip Freeman (*New York is Now!*), Joe Morris (*Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*), Edwin Prevost (*No Sound is Innocent, Minute Particulars, The First Concert*), Dana Reason (*The Myth of Absence*), David Toop (*Into the Maelstrom*), Ellen Waterman and Gillian Siddall (*Negotiated Moments*), Ben Watson (*Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*), and Davey Williams (*Solo Gig*)—and now Jack Wright's book as well. If we include discussions of free improvisation in works on free jazz or modern experimental music, or how-to manuals such as John Stevens's, we are fast approaching the point where we'd need . . . well, at least a couple of shelves in a bookcase to house it all. In other words, a not-insignificant number of people have spent a lot of time thinking about and interpreting this most spontaneous of musical activities.

Now, one of the most fascinating aspects (for me, at least) of free improvisation and the scene made up of people who play it, listen to it, and write about it, is the tension between the desire to keep it a space free of ideology and interpretation, and the simultaneous compulsion to bring at least provisional ideological conceptions and interpretations into that space. So, for instance Edwin Prevost has, rather famously, made the claim that “no sound is innocent,” but we have to keep in mind that no sound is *guilty*, either, because sounds are just vibrations in the air that strike our ears. There is neither guilt nor innocence present in the experience of hearing or producing a sound until someone builds the courtroom in which these sounds are tried. And of course, we all do build that courtroom sooner or later—or, if we don't build a courtroom, we build a museum, or an art gallery, or a temple, or a union hall, or a revolutionary gathering, or a music school, and so on. Whatever it is, we build some kind of interpretive context in which we can evaluate and define and reify these sounds that we spontaneously made or heard being made. Not only that, but the contexts that we build have certain inherent questions or value standards that help shape our interpretations. What I mean by this is that if a sound shows up in a temple, we ask it different questions and expect different things from it than we do if it appears in a courtroom.

This isn't unique to free improv, of course—quite the opposite. What is unique to free improv as an art form and to the scene of people who listen to and practice it, at least in my experience, is the degree to which those contexts get challenged and undermined, both before and after they are created, and sometimes even by their creators. Though we can't help interpreting the things we do, the improvising musicians that I have known, played with, and/or read about seem to make real efforts to acknowledge the fundamental ungraspability of the experience at the core

of free improv. That experience eludes or refuses or precedes meaning; it's an ineffable space of potentiality, or maybe it's just nothing at all and all the meaning is imported and thrown about like Jackson Pollock tossing paint onto the ultimate blank canvas—but, either way, it can't be tied down.

So, how do you talk about a phenomenon that is felt to be deeply meaningful but that refuses specific meanings, one that we seem to be drawn to interpret even as we acknowledge the limitations of our interpretations? Well, with caution, undoubtedly. My own feeling is that there are no right or wrong ways to talk about it; you make of it what you need or want it to be in that moment that you're writing (and hopefully you're able to at least partly forget your constructions when you're playing or listening). As readers, we can use these interpretive works to help expand our own interpretive possibilities or to locate their authors on the ideological and historical maps that we create (and, hopefully, we can do this while also maintaining a healthy critical distance from the works that we are reading.)

And here is what makes Jack Wright's¹ relatively new book, *The Free Musics* (2017), so important to me: his understanding of free playing puts up more resistance to ideology and interpretation than almost any of the others in the list I started this review with. This resistance, this refusal of history and ideology, was, for me, the most refreshing aspect of the book. Wright defines free playing as “freeform sound-making activity for the benefit of those playing, apart from any interest to advance themselves or what they do in the world” (174). As I read his work, Wright is arguing that we make sounds, period²; that's where everything starts, and that's where we find ourselves in fleeting moments of freedom, but it is not easy to stay in that place without outside considerations entering into the soundmaking. It seems like you shouldn't need anything at all to get there (you just play, right?) but, in fact, your efforts to get there and stay there can end up producing a thorough critique of most of the human projects of the last ten thousand years. I know that, at least in my case, reflections on those brief moments have called into question my understandings of art, of religion, of human interrelation, and of the ways that society could or should work.

Wright doesn't explicitly extend things quite that far, but he is definitely aware of the revolutionary potential of free improv. In the more historically focused first half of his book, Wright traces free playing's emergence from music and culture as we know it, particularly from free jazz and experimental music traditions: he is looking for (as he describes John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*) “music that destroys the frame for receiving it” (86), music that refuses to allow the desires it unleashes and represents to be defined by history or culture. As he notes, “to get past the now-pacified consumer forms of free musics to the central experience they promise—first of all for the players—is what I attempt to do in this book” (1). In the second part of the book, he examines what an artistic life in pursuit of that experience might look like.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One, “Jazz and Free Jazz,” examines “jazz as the prehistory of free musics” (the title of chapter 1); it moves from examining the situation leading up to the 1960's free jazz explosion to discussing that explosion and the status of free jazz in subsequent years, particularly as related to the 1980's conservative creation of a “classic jazz” that never existed as such. These chapters are not histories, even though they are loosely historically structured; in them, Wright examines the tension as he sees it between the liberatory impulse at the heart of free playing and the contexts of the jazz traditions in which it developed. In his view, free jazz has become a more or less reified genre, a memory of a challenging liberation which is not currently achievable: “that transformation of Free into free jazz can be viewed as a tragedy of defeat, or as holding the space for a visionary viewpoint and commitment” (112). Thus, for Wright, free jazz has an ambivalent nature: he's played it and

listened to it and respects it, but he also argues that at present it functions less as the metaphorical finger pointing to the moon, and more as a reminder that there was once such a finger, before it was buried in the construction of a gated compound built by Wynton Marsalis.

I do have some concerns with Wright's historical presentation: from an academic, historical perspective it may be true, but at best it's half the story; it does not represent my own experiences, nor I'm sure the experiences of many others. I remember quite well the sense of freedom and aliveness that free jazz gave me when I started going to see shows in the early 2000s; indeed, even the reification of the genre, its partial commodification, contributed to its (slight) popularity, meaning that there were more shows happening and more impressionable youngish people like myself to have our lives changed by it. When a challenge to the spectacle or the established order is taken over and given its niche, which Wright correctly notes has been done to free jazz, the process is never complete—some menace always remains. The Spectacle never loses, but it never completely wins either. Ironically, while Wright's points in these chapters are well-argued and sensible, they are also the product of exactly the sort of historical rooting that, as I understand his views, he is arguing against for free improv. Wright is speaking from within history as he traces the emergence of an impulse that would liberate us from history.

Part Two of the book is devoted to "Free Improvisation and Free Playing," and shifts the focus away from free jazz and onto free improvisation. Here, Wright goes back and forth between the British and European scenes in which this approach was more or less defined and formalized, and his own experiences developing it in the United States in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This section also contains what was, for me, the key chapter in the book—chapter 10, "Free Playing"—in which he presents free playing as an activity that challenges most of our accepted ideas about art: it invokes "the paradox of being serious about art without creating serious art" (176). For Wright, free playing tries to start from nothing and to follow desire where it leads: "the slightest intimation that something vital is missing prompts the search for ever more partners, tools, and materials" (200). He constantly reminds us of how it is linked to, or relies on, mistakes, boredom, frustration, and anxiety. It is an activity, that's all, one often done with others (hence, he discusses the social dynamics of improvising gatherings) but not for others. In an odd way, I found this steadfast refusal to glamorize free improv to be one of the most appealing aspects of his book. Wright isn't creating heroes and there are no pedestals here. Just lots of playing. And frustration.

Finally, Part Three, "The New Old Things," gives Wright's view of the present situation of free improv, speaking of specific American scenes, the rise of such sub-genres as "lower case" playing (which emphasizes sparseness and space), the influence of a punk-rock-derived DIY ethos on free improv, and the challenging relationship of free improv and soi-disant "experimental" music. In this overview, working forward from what Wright sees as a rebirth of interest in free improv in the mid-1990s, one pronounced theme is the final separation of free improv from free jazz (which also underwent something of a resurgence in that period). Associated with this is the move away from a New York-centred focus to a somewhat more distributed, and mobile, field of engagement. The sense in this last and shortest part of the book is that free improv has now definitively become a living thing of its own. Its main predecessor, free jazz, is still around, but (in Wright's view) is in something of a holding pattern, while free improv is on its own, acquiring a range of possibilities and approaches. This section is firmly focused on Wright's own experiences and is the most autobiographical part of the book; I appreciate that he is explicitly drawing on his own experiences here, rather than hiding his own subjectivity behind universal claims.

I hope there will never be a book that's accepted as a definitive history of free improv, nor an accepted statement of what it is. Wright's book is certainly neither of these things. Rather, it holds one player's thoughts about this weird approach to making music, an approach that would seem almost relentlessly banal and pointless were it not for the way it invites us to rethink our lives—and for its occasional ability to make the heavens open. That's enough.

Notes

¹ You can read multiple versions of Jack Wright's biography here: <http://www.springgardenmusic.com/jackbio.html>. To summarize, he's been aptly called the "Johnny Appleseed of free improvisation"; he's been playing this music on saxophone, touring voraciously, and building community since the late 1970s.

² I'm reminded here of one of my earliest free improv playing experiences. I was playing with the drummer Jack Vorvis, and before we played, I asked him if he had any guiding principles or ideas for the set. He said, "No call and response! In fact, no listening—just play!"