

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

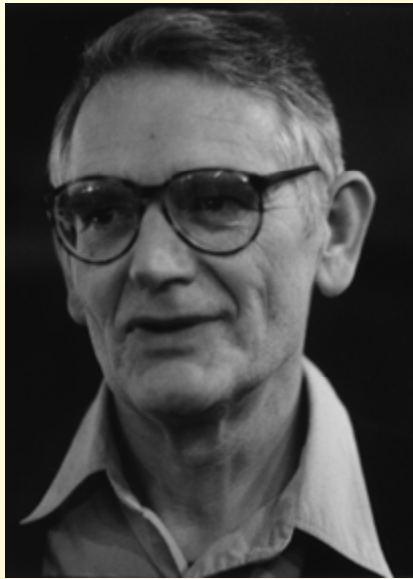
FYS 129

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Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present “musicians in their own words”.



Derek Bailey

British guitarist

January 29, 1930 – December 25, 2005

Do I have an inspirational quote for the course?

Through-out that winter [ca. 1945-6], which was a bad winter, I worked in a road gang for the Post Office telephones, and that's fucking hard work, and anyway, hanging off a bloody telegraph pole when the temperature's about ten below zero is not a lot of fun when you're up there for about four hours, especially after you've dug the hole that you put the telegraph pole in. That's what I did: dug a hole, put a telegraph pole in it and climbed up the fucker. That kind of experience puts everything into focus. I can't think of playing any kind of music that's worse than that. Delivering milk was not a bad job for my purposes: you get up in the dark, you go out, do it, finish by ten or eleven in the morning and practise all day if you can keep yourself awake. From that kind of thing comes the realisation that if you have the opportunity to do something that means something to you, it's absurd to be putting your main energies into something else. I knew I couldn't do it, I knew I couldn't push back this barrier of ignorance – both musical and in other ways – unless I did it exclusively. I wasn't entirely clear what I wanted to do, but I knew I couldn't do it part-time.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 30.

Alternative Inspirational Quote

My whole life story is really a strenuous attempt to push back this colossal ignorance I've always carried around with me.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997
From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson,
Verso, London, 2004, p. 55.

Alternative alternative inspirational quote

Stupidity was always my ace-in-the-hole,
I could always play that.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997
From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson,
Verso, London, 2004, p. 37.

Bailey's definition of Improvisation

Improvisation is not knowing what it is until you do it,
composition is not doing it until you know what it is.

Derek Bailey

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson,
Verso, London, 2004, p. 440.

Bailey on predictability

That's one thing we had in common. An impatience with the gruesomely predictable.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 60.

Bailey on Stimulation for Improvisation

LP: You have said that the two most stimulating things in playing are indifference and unfamiliarity.

Bailey: Yeah, that's right. When putting them together. And it's strange how stimulating indifference is. I have always noticed that the best groups are the ones with people who are not the same, who don't have too much in common. They have some things in common but perhaps the main characteristics were how they worked with each other personally. And quite often, their musical outlook is quite different and that can really produce all kinds of things and I have seen that over and over again.

Derek Bailey, interview.

From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Bailey on Experimental Collaborations

I used to run Thursday nights at the Little Theatre, and I'd play with absolutely anybody who'd turn up...My view is more that if I go out to play, I stop playing too often. I think it's because there's too much non-playing in one's life. It doesn't bother me. I can stand to play a heap of shit sometimes. You try and make something: not regardless, but you're not going to give up because the other guy is playing what you consider a heap of shit. But stopping? What I do is not that precious. There are times when I'll play with more or less any fucking thing.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 61.

Bailey on Shocking(!) Music

One of the things about this kind of playing, as long as I can remember – as long as it's been identifiable as something or other – people have claimed to have 'gone beyond its boundaries'. I read a review recently about someone playing a melody and the guy saying, 'This is going to really offend the purists.' People have been playing fucking melodies in the hope of shocking somebody for as long as people have played this stuff....Playing very quiet can disturb people, including other musicians.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 103.

Bailey on Singlemindedness

This thing I talk about, the necessity of doing music full-time, is not just a question of earning a living. Earning a living is essential because I've got no other way of living I can contemplate. By the time I got to my mid-twenties, I felt I'd had enough of the real world [of commercial work]. After my mid-twenties it was OK, I didn't seem to have to do it anymore, but it's always seemed to me to be necessary with music – either thinking about it or doing it – to do it exclusively. I can do this one thing, possibly, whatever it is, but not in combination with something else.

Derek Bailey, interview 1997

From “Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation” by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 105.

Bailey on the interest of music as a process

In so far as I listen with interest to a record, it's usually to figure out how it was arrived at. The musical end product is where interest starts to flag. It's a bit like jigsaw puzzles. Emptied out of the box, there's a heap of pieces, all shapes, sizes and colours, in themselves attractive and could add up to anything-intriguing. Figuring out how to put them together can be interesting, but what you finish up with as often as not is a picture of unsurpassed banality. Music's like that.

Derek Bailey

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 440.

Watson on the avant garde

As punk was soon to prove, what was wrong with rock not its noise and populist appeal, but the way marketing deprived it of immediacy, humor and politics. The exploitation of the avant garde as a musical 'style' meant misconstruing its aims. Having a recognizable star – Robert Wyatt or Carla Bley – sing a song by John Cage effectively cancels its disruption of classical performance logic and converts it into an exercise in sentiment. This was the version of the avant garde that the Kronos Quartet subsequently brought to market: rather than a culture of debate and experiment which resists passive consumption, the 'avant' becomes a smorgasbord of exotic comfits proffered to well-dressed yuppies.

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 132.

Watson on Bailey as a leader

It is not a matter of elevating Bailey's contribution to unapproachable 'genius' level, but of understanding *how* his particular approach enables musical dialogue to happen. He is a leader, not because he dictates, but because his example can be learned from. Let's think once again about what he plays.

Like a truly interesting conversationalist, Bailey's guitar-playing does not flatter the musicians he plays with, or attempt to make them sound good in a facile way: he attempts to understand what they are playing by contradicting them. He 'tests' their musical utterances just as Socrates tested the statements of his contemporary Athenians.

From "Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation" by Ben Watson, Verso, London, 2004, p. 137.