

# 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”.



# Ornette Coleman

**American  
saxophonist  
(March 9, 1930 –  
June 11, 2015)**

## Coleman on Making Mistakes

**Coleman:** It was when I found out I could make mistakes that I knew I was on to something.

Source unknown.

## Coleman on Self Definition

**Coleman:** I decided, if I'm going to be poor and black and all, the least thing I'm going to do is to try and find out who I am. I created everything about me.

## Coleman on Harmolodics

**Coleman:** Harmolodics is a base of expanding the melody, the harmonic structure, the rhythm, and above all the free improvised structure of a composition beyond what they would be if they were just played as a regular 2-5-1 structure, or if they were played with the concept of a melody have a certain arrangement to know when to start or stop.

## Coleman on Spontaneous Music

**Coleman:** When our group plays, before we start out to play, we do not have any idea what the end result will be. Each player is free to contribute what he feels in the music at any given moment. We do not begin with a preconceived notion as to what kind of effect we will achieve.



## Coleman on Improvisation

**Coleman:** I now call it free-phrasing, but when I used to try to improvise I thought it was just that—something you had never done before. I never thought about it as something you were trying to interpret, like if you have a hat on and you put a feather in it and suddenly it looks different. You can improvise and make a person think you have a hat on.



## Coleman on the Emotional Content of Music

**Coleman:** Music is the sound of your emotions. It's your heart, it's your feelings, it's your belief, it's your ability, and most of all, it's your love. And: In music, the only thing that matters is whether you feel it or not.

[http://www.jazzhistoryonline.com/Ornette\\_Coleman.html](http://www.jazzhistoryonline.com/Ornette_Coleman.html)

## A Coleman Anecdote

**Coleman:** I was in the South when minorities were oppressed, and I identified with them through music. I was in Texas, I started to play the saxophone and make a living for my family by playing on the radio. One day, I walked into a place that was full of gambling and prostitution, people arguing, and I saw a woman get stabbed—then I thought that I had to get out of there. I told my mother that I didn't want to play this music anymore because I thought that I was only adding to all that suffering. She replied, "What's got hold of you, you want somebody to pay you for your soul?" I hadn't thought of that, and when she told me that, it was like I had been re-baptized.

**JD:** Your mother was very clear-headed.

**OC:** Yes, she was an intelligent woman. Ever since that day I've tried to find a way to avoid feeling guilty for doing something that other people don't do.

## On the Origin of Lonely Woman

**Coleman:** Before becoming known as a musician, when I worked in a big department store, one day, during my lunch break, I came across a gallery where someone had painted a very rich white woman who had absolutely everything that you could desire in life, and she had the most solitary expression in the world. I had never been confronted with such solitude, and when I got back home, I wrote a piece that I called "Lonely Woman."

The Other's Language: Jacques Derrida Interviews Ornette Coleman, June 23, 1997.  
[http://www.ubu.com/papers/Derrida-Interviews-Coleman\\_1997.pdf](http://www.ubu.com/papers/Derrida-Interviews-Coleman_1997.pdf)

## On Harmolodics

**Coleman:** Our concept of the written music is called Harmolodic. It is a theory, not a style. When the result of information is shared equally it is Harmolodic—where each individual has the right to change, make or use any workable information to bring about a better result in an instant.....You don't have to change your language or change your style in order for someone to appreciate what you are doing artistically...The kids are going to be born—and there are those that are as old as myself—who will be able to enjoy the true human expression without any ethnical discrimination.

“Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music”, Peter Niklas Wilson, Berkeley Hills Books, 1999, p. 70.

## On Egalitarianism in Harmolodics

**Coleman:** Harmolodics means transposing any sound whatsoever into your own playing, without having to give up your own identity in the process...I believe that this is probably one of the most democratic ways of expressing artistic contents there is...”

Communicated to Ralph Quinke, 1987.

“Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music”, Peter Niklas Wilson, Berkeley Hills Books, 1999, p. 87.



## On Negative Connotations of Improvisation

**Coleman:** Once I heard Eubie Blake (February 7, 1887–February 12, 1983) say that when he was playing in black bands for white audiences, during the time when segregation was strong, that the musicians had to go on stage without any written music. The musicians would go backstage, look at the music, then leave the music there and go out and play it. He was saying that they had a more saleable appeal if they pretended not to know what they were doing. The white audience felt safer. If they had music in front of them, the audience would think that they were trying to be white. So that's what I think about the word improvising. It's outdated. The term doesn't describe the musician's individual struggle for expression.

## On the Importance of Perception in Defining Reality

**Palmer:** The experience put us all in touch with something very, very old, a way of living and looking at the world that's more about humanity's roots than the roots of any one culture. I think we'd all grappled intellectually with the idea that reality is just one perceptual consensus, that you create the world in the act of perceiving it and it literally can be what you make it. But I don't think any of us really believed that, until Joujouka sort of rubbed our noses in it. Up there, the consensus is that magic works, so it does; if you hang around and keep your eyes open, you have to accept that.

Robert Palmer, in "Playing in the Register of Light: Ornette in Jajouka", by Drew Franklin, *Village Voice Jazz Special*, June 1987, p. 26.

Cited in "Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music", Peter Niklas Wilson, Berkeley Hills Books, 1999, p. 59.