

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”.



Mary Halvorson

**American Guitarist
(1980-)**

Halvorson on her Training

MH: After high school I went to Wesleyan University, where I got more serious about music. I studied with Joe Morris on guitar, and Anthony Braxton as a kind of all round inspiration.

AP: What was that like?

MH: With both Joe and with Anthony, there was a lot of emphasis on exploring, taking risks, and finding your own voice. The point really got hammered into my head. With Anthony, it was inspiring to get a glimpse into his expansive musical world. He's created a completely unique world while having great respect for all types of music. That was really important to me: being open-minded about all styles.

AP: How did you find your own voice? Did you consciously synthesize those influences, or did it happen naturally?

MH: It was both. I would listen to their music and see that they both had a strong thing that was truly theirs. But when I started studying with Joe, he would never play guitar in the lessons—he didn't want me to copy what he was doing [*laughs*]. He would play upright bass instead, and we would do a lot of improvising together. It was like, "You're studying with me, but that doesn't mean you're here to learn all the things I'm playing." He encouraged me to explore on my own.

Halvorson on Playing Non-Traditionally

MH: Despite her general tendency toward the nontraditional, Halvorson affirms that she does, in fact, "have such a deep respect for so many musical traditions — I just don't feel that playing in those traditions is who I am." Rather, she says, "I try to take from them and then do something I think is different. And that can often lead to things that are a bit strange or that maybe go in a surprising direction." Halvorson pauses. "But I'm not trying to be contrarian or anything. It's just my aesthetics, I guess."

Halvorson on Being a Jazz Musician

FP: In general, as or with what type of jazz do you identify?

MH: I definitely prefer not to identify with a type. It's a question that constantly comes up. Recently, Nate Wooley asked, "What is jazz?" to a bunch of different musicians. He published it in his journal, Sound American. What was really interesting about it was a lot of people got really angry. People get really worked up about, "What is jazz?" or, "Do you identify yourself as a jazz musician?" It's such a loaded term for some people. It isn't all that loaded for me. I love and study jazz. Some people would consider what I do jazz, and some would say, "No way. That's not jazz." I don't really care. I'm not attached to the label at all. If people want to call it that, fine. If not, that's fine too. I have a lot of different influences. It also probably depends on the project. Some are more jazz oriented. I guess I don't really have a particular genre.

Halvorson on an Element of Surprise

MH: I really like beautiful melodies, and I like harmony and rhythm, and then, turning the weird switch just a little bit, derailing them. There's an element of surprise. But then, that gets tricky too, because if you're constantly doing that, it's not surprising anymore. So it's about balancing the different elements—if everything's out of time, throwing in something rhythmic, or just trying to feel what the music needs.

Halvorson on Weird Music

SD: Were you the kind of kid who, if you heard something challenging or unusual, you were like, I gotta check that out?

MH: You know, this was never love at first listen. Even with the first jazz I heard—Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk—I didn't really get it, and I remember listening to it over and over again. And gradually I started to get it. The more you know, the more interesting it gets, and that's definitely true for weirder music. I wasn't instantly drawn to weird, crazy music.

Halvorson on Clarity and Control

MH: I do think a lot about clarity, and I like the idea of being in control of the instrument. So if I place a totally smeared, flabby-sounding line, I want that to be on purpose, not because I couldn't execute something. It's not like I have one hundred percent control, but I try to make those decisions purposeful.

Halvorson on Free Playing

MH: I guess so. I feel free to go in any direction I want to. I'm not attached to genre. I'm not attached to jazz by any means. I'm not trying to create something that's weird, although it does come out weird, sometimes. I just want to make music that I think is interesting. That could be anything.

Halvorson on Astrology

RC: I knew you were interested in astrology—so, what's your sign?

MH: A Libra. Libra sun, Libra rising and there's Capricorn moon.

RC: Do you find the astrological stuff affects your music or inform what you're doing musically?

MH: Well, it's interesting just the way you relate to people. Like, the band Instant Strangers is a funny example because me and Tim Berne have the same birthday and then Tomas Fujiwara and Stephan Crump, their birthdays are one day off. And the angle that our four Suns form is a trine, which is like an easy flow of energy. So you can see things like that sometimes. I had a band once in college where we had all four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Each person in the band was a different element and that was also kind of a cool balance. Also, in my septet, five out of seven of the people are Libras