

# 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”.

# Steve Lacy

American  
soprano  
saxophonist  
(July 23, 1934  
– June 4, 2004)



## Lacy on Arbitrariness

**DB:** You've used the word "arbitrary" before, in describing Thelonius Monk's music.

**Lacy:** I've been running from it for a long time. I shun it. I mean, a lot of my endeavors have been a flight from what I consider to be the "arbitrary" at any given moment. A search for something more meaningful, something that makes sense right then and there—that's the only criterion. When you play, you just try and make sense to yourself at the time, that's all you can do.

## Lacy on Values in Music

**Lacy:** There's a lot of daring in music now. Anything goes, but your own integrity tells you that everything doesn't "go". So it's a very delicate situation. It's the play of one set of values against another: your own, and the collective sensibility of where it's at now. What to expect.

Steve Lacy Conversations, edited by Jason Weiss, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 27.

## Lacy on Having People Like his Music

**PC:** Do you prefer that people understand your music or that they like it, even without understanding it?

**Lacy:** I prefer that they like it, that's better. I only ask them to give me a little of their time. It's not essential for them to understand. It's enough for them to come, to be there.

Interview by Philippe Carles, 1965, collected in Steve Lacy Conversations, edited by Jason Weiss, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 27.

## Lacy on his Most Cherished Project

**JZ:** What is your most cherished project? Do you hope to achieve it in the near future, and with whom?

**Lacy:** To become myself. I hope it will take me my entire life. I hope to realize this project with the cooperation of everyone who's willing.

Interview from Jazz Magazine, 1965, collected in Steve Lacy Conversations, edited by Jason Weiss, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 27.

## Lacy on Working

**MD:** You said you couldn't get work, but then you said earlier that you were playing every night.

**Lacy:** Well, we invented work. We went around New York systematically street by street looking for any kind of place that we could invent a job, and we found, for example, an Armenian restaurant with a downstairs room, and little coffee shops and things like that. We didn't make any money with it but it was an excuse to play.

interview with Martin Davidson, 1974.



## Lacy on Improvising Around a Tune

**MD:** But now you are using tunes practically all the time, and yet, I find that the improvisation is freer than it was before. This seems a bit of a contradiction.

**Lacy:** Well, it's a paradox, not a contradiction. I find that the more pinned down you are, the more free you are in a way - that the freedom can come out within limits. Then you are really free. Whereas when you are completely free, after a while it dries up, it turns into the same thing all the time - it winds up to be an act, and that's why that ended. However, we always go back to total freedom as a way of research, and we stay there for quite a while just to see what we can fish out. But I object to the meandering and I object to the act part of it. When it becomes an act it's dead for me. You have to find something else.

interview with Martin Davidson, 1974.

## Lacy on Monk's Music

**MD:** I find that strange, because at that time you were concentrating on playing Monk's music.

**Lacy:** Maybe too concentrated. I was trying too hard. I was practising all day and playing at night and going crazy.

**MD:** For a long period before and after that you virtually just specialised in playing Monk.

**Lacy:** Yeah. For about twelve years, really.

**MD:** Why just Monk's music?

**Lacy:** Well, it had a certain consistency to it. I wanted to see the proportions of the whole thing and to check out the consistency of the language. It was just there and nobody was doing anything with it. There were all these interesting tunes that he had just recorded once years ago and he wasn't even playing them himself. So, it excited me a lot that there was this body of music. I found it the most interesting repertoire around, and it fitted my horn and my personality. It was a challenge and I was just wild over it. I wanted to learn all those tunes because I wanted to play in the structures. I didn't even know why - I didn't have a why - it was just love, interest. I just got into them gradually, one or two, then I'd see three more, then there was another dozen, and it just went on and on. Then I had to go back to the first ones and reconsider them, and I'd find I was doing something wrong and correct that and...It was just a long school. Then I met Roswell Rudd in the '60s and he joined me because he was wild in that way too. He helped me learn a lot of the ones I didn't know and vice versa. We collaborated and practiced together and we formed this group and played just that stuff. Because it was a way of going through something to get to something else. We knew there was something on the other side, and we wanted to go through it to see what was there and how it would be after we'd gone through it.

interview with Martin Davidson, 1974.

## Lacy on Going High

**MD:** You also tend to go very high.

**Lacy:** Years and years ago, Sonny Rollins took me to hear a saxophone player named Rascher Sigurd who was a classical alto player who had perfected a four octave technique on the saxophone where he could play any note within four octaves at any volume he wanted it. Actually, the music he played was not too interesting - Glazunov, French sonatas and stuff like that, very dull stuff - but he played so extraordinary that I started working on my registers too. Now, when the skies are clear, I have four octaves - sometimes a little more. But in order to have that you have to keep it up everyday, really, otherwise your lip goes away. And so having these extra notes on top, you naturally want to use them in some way. Anyway, it's more interesting upstairs. It's unexplored territory up there around the ceiling.

interview with Martin Davidson, 1974.

## Lacy on Dangerous Music

**MD:** It does strange things to your ears.

**Lacy:** Yeah. Very. It's dangerous though. Those sounds are dangerous - you can hurt people with them - you really have to be very careful with them. It's just sounds. Sounds is what interests me the most. Like Schoenberg said: `The thing that interests me the most is sounds, great big beautiful sounds.

interview with Martin Davidson, 1974.

## Lacy on Developing Individuality through Collaboration

**MM:** I try not to ask questions that put words in your mouth, but could you offer some advice to help people develop their own individuality?

**Lacy:** Attach yourself to somebody stronger than you and get to the bottom of what they do. Then find somebody else. I think it is in collaboration that the nature of the art is revealed. I've always been extremely lucky in playing with great people who knew much more than I did. That's how I got from there to here. I would advise everyone to start from where you are at this particular moment, and think about what you do , what you want to do and who you could work with that would help you get a little further. There must be somebody better than you (laughter)!

interview with Mel Martin, 1991.

## Lacy on Perseverance

**Lacy:** It can be anywhere. People should learn that it can happen anywhere if you have a few individuals who are crazy enough and can get something going. Before the work comes to you, you have to invent work. What I learned with Cecil Taylor a bit back then was strategy and survival and how to resist the temptations and resist getting discouraged because if you're trying to invent something new, you're going to reach a lot of discouraging points and most people give up. If you're well schooled and tough enough, you persevere, like Monk did.

interview with Mel Martin, 1991.

## Lacy on Perseverance

DEAR MK-PETERSON,  
JAZZ IS ALREADY HOT MUSIC; IT DOESN'T  
WANT TO BE 'GRILLED'. ANALYSIS IS LIKE KILLING  
BUTTERFLIES, SO AS TO CLASSIFY THEM, IN FORMALDEHYDE.  
WE RESIST! "IF YOU HAVE TO ASK WHAT IT IS,  
DON'T MESS WITH IT" (FATS WALLER).  
JAZZ IS A LANGUAGE, A WAY OF LIFE, A  
GLORIOUS HISTORY. HOW CAN YOU SAY WHICH WAY IT  
(AS IF IT WAS AN 'IT') IS GOING, OR EVEN, THE NAME  
OF 'THE JAZZ OF OUR TIME'. DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, HAVE YOU  
HEARD EVERYBODY?, OR EVEN, ANYBODY, ENOUGH TIMES?  
PERSONALLY, IN THE MUSIC I MAKE, I'M NOT TRYING TO EXPRESS  
ANYTHING, I DON'T BELIEVE I'M THAT IMPORTANT, I THINK  
THE WORK (THE MUSIC) IS OF FAR GREATER INTEREST. OTHERWISE,  
IT WOULDN'T BE WORTH DOING.  
NOBODY ASKED US TO PLAY LIKE THIS. WE ALL HAVE TO  
STRUGGLE TO MAKE A LIVING AT IT. WE PLAY WHAT & HOW  
WE WANT TO PLAY, & ONLY THAT, DURING A LIFETIME.  
NOW, HOW ARE YOU GOING TO QUANTIFY & QUALIFY THAT?  
WHAT IS THE PRICE OF FREEDOM?

Steve Lacy

Jan 9, 2008

Music and the Creative Spirit,  
Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press,  
2006, p. 147.