

# 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”.

# Roscoe Mitchell



**American saxophonist & composer (August 3, 1940- )**

## Mitchell on Structuring Group Improvisation

AC: ...For example, improvisers tend to show that they're listening by imitating what the other person's playing. That can get to be an enormous cliché and in fact you can really show that you're listening to people by doing something radically different from what they're doing...

RM: Well, you actually hit on one of the problems. You're doing the phrase and then someone else is coming up and doing it. That means that they're not really there in the moment. They're waiting around to listen to see what you're doing. I would describe it like being behind on a written piece of music—you really know your part, and I don't really know mine, so I'm kind of following and listening to see what you're doing and because of that I can't really be with you. That was one of the problems I wanted to correct, getting people to function as individuals inside of the improvisation so that counterpoint is maintained, which is a very important element in music. I also addressed the issue of people leaving some space of rest in between what they're doing. You wouldn't compose a piece that was a run-on sentence, but this is what a lot of inexperienced improvisers do. I introduce complex rhythmic figures so that everybody's not always hitting on one all the time. You know, I bring them in at different parts of the beat—all of these things that you would have in a written piece of music.

## Mitchell on Exploration through Music

RM : No. The way I see it, the Art Ensemble is like what you just said. It was a band of individuals who would go out and explore different things and bring in new ideas to the collective. It was a unit that studied music all the time and was constantly exploring different ways of doing music. Over the years, you develop this vocabulary that you can expand and extend. I can go back now and look at some of those concepts in a whole other kind of way that I couldn't have done back then because I didn't have the knowledge or the language to be able to do that. For instance, in the '60s I heard these long lines at a rapid pace that never stopped. I couldn't put those lines together then because I couldn't circular breathe. But once I was able to, I could practice and perfect them. With me, everything is a study. If I've done something this way tonight, I'm trying to do that a little bit differently the next night, because the element of music that interests me is the exploration. I think I've probably said this before, but we're living in the era of the Super Musician now; this is what I'm trying to be.

## Mitchell on Development of One's Own Sound

AC: But on the other hand, take an improviser, if they're going to get themselves to be able to play with the saxophone sound of a Johnny Hodges, how creative can they be with it in terms of their own playing?

RM: It's hard, because if you look at the real-life stories, I mean, Bird used to listen to Lester Young. They don't sound anything like each other. What I've noticed about the masters of the music is that it's really music. It's not mechanical in any sense of the word. They're hearing ideas and bringing them about based on their lifestyles. This is what I think makes their music so important. I look at the saxophone as one of the most versatile instruments there is. There are so many people with so many different approaches to the saxophone; it's a study. So you study these different styles. You think about the tenor, there are a lot of people to study there. It goes on and on. What I would say to a musician is this: That's there for you to study, you take that, and then you bring your own thing to it, and that's where your own message comes from.

## Mitchell on the Basis of Improvisation

AAJ: About your approach to music, when you conceptualize musically are you drawing from a background in free improvisation or do you think in terms of musical structure, like classical music structure?

RM: Everything, you know. Our goal has always been just to study music. I'm a very strong believer to be really a good improviser you have to understand how composition works also. So, you have to be able to write, you have to be able to play, you have to be able to improvise as a soloist, you have to be able to improvise in a larger ensemble, and so on and so forth like that.

## Mitchell on Spontaneous Composition

RM: Well, I believe that the super musician...this is what I would like to be, you know. The super musician, as close as I can figure it out, is someone that moves freely in music. But, of course, that's with a well established background behind you. The way I see it is everything is evolving. Of course we are a band with a lot of instruments but if you look back before the be bop era, if you looked at a big band, it was amazing what the woodwind players were playing, and what the percussionists had, okay? So, the super musician has a big task in front of them because they have to know something about all the music that went down because we are approaching this age of spontaneous composition. And that's what it is. Really good improvisation is spontaneous composition. The thing that you have to do is get yourself to the level where you can do it spontaneously. If you are sitting at home composing, you've got time. You can say, "Oh, maybe I'll try it this way, or maybe I'll try it that way." But you want to get yourself to the point to where you can make these decisions spontaneously.



## Mitchell on Advice for Improvisers

AAJ: What do you suggest for musicians who are playing free improvised...?

RM: Study music. Study music because you are going to need that. You're going to need to know how everything works. Of course, you are working on extending your ideas just like you do in composition. You should be able to think that way. You should be able to think composition, you know, if you are putting a piece together. I mean, I've developed all sorts of practice methods for doing things. Sometimes I get one of those big clocks, you know, with the minute hands, and I may do a series of one minute pieces and then structure these so that, like, in 15 seconds something changes, in 30 seconds something else changes, 45 seconds or somewhere in between you're reaching the middle of the piece and then at the end you're going down. I mean, if I'm working on a 15 minute solo piece I may practice up to 30 minutes so I know I've got a good 15 going there. You see what I'm saying? So, you have to always challenge yourself, all the time. You always have to challenge yourself, all the time. You get one thing down then you go to the next. And then a lot of the stuff is made up by the individuals, you know, your own practice methods because you have to figure these out for yourself. I mean, you figure out what area you want to look at and then you start, you know, you go for it.

## Mitchell on Originality in Music

RM: I mean, the only way I judge people is: these people, what have they done, what did they contribute of their own? And then, if they haven't contributed anything of their own, then, for me, I have to put them in another... category: there's the person that created it... and the person that came along and... imitated it. So, it's like... it's like that for me. I mean, that's the way I was brought up. I mean, if somebody came up trying to sing like Nat King Cole, people would say oh, wait a minute, he's trying to sound like Nat King Cole. He's trying to sound like Charlie Parker. You know, that doesn't change, it's always gotta be like that. We're gonna be measured by, you know, what you do. And if you haven't done anything... you know, people like Muhal, Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, they will never run out of ideas, they will never run out of ideas, but people who are not of that particular persuasion will always run out of ideas, because they never had an idea in the first place. That's I've always encouraged my students: to look to their own selves; it's easy to be your own self, it's easy to be your own self, it's difficult to be someone else, you can't be someone else, it's easy to be yourself, 'cause in a way you train to be yourself, you develop your own ideas, then the same source that gave you those ideas continues to give you more ideas.

## Mitchell on Silence

PSF: Do you think that silence is an important component of your work?

RM: Yes, that's true. I weigh it as about fifty percent. It's like you got silence, that's a strong element. If you're just sitting somewhere and it's totally silent, a lot of people don't even have that luxury anymore, living in a city. In a concert hall, you can have that. When you interrupt that with a sound, then you have music. It's fascinating to study what effect that has and what effect it has on silence. I think that's one of the things that inspires me to keep working in these irregular patterns.

## Mitchell on Muhal Richard Abrams

JG: I know I asked you for some words about him before, but maybe we can conclude with some comments about you, the AACM, and your relations with Muhal Richard Abrams over the years. Roscoe?

RM: Well, like I said before, Muhal has like always been a mentor, not only to me but so many other musicians in Chicago. I think it was through his efforts of keeping that Experimental Band going where all these people could get together; it provided a place where all these ideas could come out. Like I said, this was where the ideas for putting the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians came about. We were interested in controlling our own destinies, because we'd read the books and seen what happened to people who were out there on their own. I think they didn't really treat Charlie Parker that well, or Coltrane. I think Charlie Parker had maybe one European tour or something in his life; I don't know what it was. But those kinds of things made us want to reassess the situation and try to band together, so that we could create self-employment for ourselves, sponsor each other in concerts of our own original music, maintain a training program for young, inspired musicians. These are the kinds of things that have kept us going throughout the years.

## Mitchell on Nonaah

JG: Putting together a solo piece, does it come from your explorations of the instrument? Does it come from a more conceptual framework...?

RM: Well, let's look at it. One part of "Nonaah" is set up so that it has wide intervals. One of the thoughts that I had when I was composing it, I wanted to have a piece that was played as a solo instrument that would give the illusion of being two instruments, and with the wide intervals like that, you can get that, because the instrument sounds different in the lower range and the mid range and the high range, and then there's also the altissimo range, of course, which sounds different from any of those other registers. So if you construct a melody that moves in that way, in taking advantage of the intervals, then you will achieve that goal at the end. And that was one of the thoughts that I had when I was constructing the composition.