

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”.



Joe Morris

**American guitarist
(September 13,
1955—)**

Morris on Defining Free Music

Morris: Therefore, here, the term free music applies to the practice of making music that allows a composer or player to use composition and improvisation in any way they might feel is useful to present their art, regardless of the prevailing notion of what is “correct”, no matter the idiom or context.

Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music, Joe Morris, Riti Publishing, 2012.

Morris on the Origin of Free Music

Morris: It is fair to say that the origins and perpetuation of free music in the modern context—as it is dealt with and examined here, the contemporary version that has fostered the global community of free music and that is so varied and expansive—has its origins in the African-American music of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music, Joe Morris, Riti Publishing, 2012.

Morris on Free Music as an agent of Subversion

Morris: While the range of aesthetic or expressive directions varies, it could be said that the embedded aesthetic in the majority of free music has at least a strong disposition toward that which is subversive in one or more ways. Meaning that something about the music is an attempt to change the understanding of what already exists, whether it pertains to braking the rules of musical technique, challenging institutional, political, or social conventions, or to entice, inform, elicit or deepen the emotional, cognitive or spiritual response of disposition of the listener.

Subverting the norm, the accepted, the traditional (or the understanding of tradition), seems to be a core reason for the existence of free music.

Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music, Joe Morris, Riti Publishing, 2012.

Morris on the Democracy of Free Music

Morris: This one performance objective—which is an attempt to make every performance more democratic in practice—is a statement on the utopian ideal of equality in action, which is a core aesthetic value of the early European free improvisation examples.

Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music, Joe Morris, Riti Publishing, 2012.

Morris on the Why he Plays Free

Tafari: Your compositions are a reflection of your unique style of playing and both your playing and tunes have been turning heads and making people pay attention to your unique style. We've known each other a few years now, but I don't think I've ever asked you how you arrived at your style. And, related to that, did you start out playing as "unconventionally" as you do now or was it an evolution?

Morris: I remember the day I made the decision to try not to play like other guitarists. I figured that if someone was unique enough to come up with their own thing and inspire me, the least I could do was leave their thing alone and try to deal with my own. It was clear to me from the start that jazz is completely about being unconventional and unique. The real body of work is made up of the inventions of unconventional musicians. I take that model and I try to deal with the primary influences that those musicians made us aware of and I try to speak about those things with my own voice. My way of playing is just an effort to deal with the truest version I know of the meaning and motion of the music. So instead of learning to play the guitar by just studying guitarists, I studied the aesthetics of the musicians who were the most original, and I tried to trust my own version of what they suggested we deal with. Adding to those suggestions is the ultimate goal. My version is not fixed. It's changing all the time.

Joe Morris, interview by Frank Tafuri for Omnitone, 2010.

Morris on the Relationship with the Audience

Tafari: You've been doing this for quite a few years and you're still doing it. Why do you think it's taken people so long to "catch up" to you, if you will? And have they really "caught up"?

Morris: Some people have caught up. Not enough have though. You're right, I'm still doing it and I'm just getting started. It's my job to be out front. I'm doing my own thing with tremendous musicians who are doing their own things. We aren't interpretive artists or genre benders and we aren't trying to shock people. We are searching our souls and trying to touch people in an honest way with music. I knew when I decided to do this with my life that it would be hard. Part of the reward though is knowing that I haven't done one contrived thing to get over. People will catch up, but more importantly, new people are into this. Listeners looking for their own experiences. They know that we are playing to them now. We aren't playing to the academy waiting for their approval. The audience that gets what we do knows that the reward is in hearing the flow of sound, melody and rhythm. If they listen carefully the logic, patterns, and expression will reveal themselves. This music is for and about the people listening.

Joe Morris, interview by Frank Tafuri for Omnitone, 2010.

Morris on Aspiring to the Alto Voice

Morris: So because I've always worked as a free improviser and as a free jazz player, and that's all I've ever wanted to do, I know a lot about how to put things together to create environments to play in. And I've always had to do that because otherwise the guitar gets put into a sort of subservient role in the ensemble, it's just the nature of the instrument and the way everyone plays. So anyone who's played with me over the years can tell you that I'm really exact about what we're going to use so that my instrument doesn't get put into the rhythm guitar part. Part of my role in doing this is to put the guitar up front and let it articulate those ideas that I hear being expressed by the sort of alto voice lineage -- Bird and Ornette and Braxton -- which is the sort of high language in the music. The alto voice, to me, holds that better than any other, and as you follow through the theoretical aspects of the music, the alto voice leads that along. So I want the guitar to speak like the alto voice.

Joe Morris, interview by Brian Carpenter for WZBC, 2002.

Morris on Advice for Young Musicians

AAJ: What advice would you give to somebody just starting out?

JM: It depends where they're at musically. If they feel as if their music is ready to be presented...I tell students (who study with me privately or in workshops) to take their music seriously, and to document it every way they can. And if they feel it's time to document it, to document it. But, at the same time, while they take it seriously, they have to keep looking for people who've done more work. You can't get too big a head.

In this kind of music, there are people who are 80 years old who have had fewer gigs than I've had, who are tremendous. So you can't get too self-absorbed about what's happening with you. The thing that I'm doing is not about that. It's really about being part of that group. Like getting permission to be a part of that group. So you went through it respectfully, you know.

Having humility is really hard to do. You have to be able to have humility and be very bold at the same time. But that's the payback. Being able to participate in that little subculture. To me, that's the reason for doing this. That is the thing. It's a parallel world. It's a rare thing. I can talk to people and feel as if I'm in the tradition that Eric Dolphy and Derek Bailey are in. That's amazing to me. I get chills when I think about that, because I admire their artistic commitment, and their humanity. That's my goal, to be part of a thing like that.

Joe Morris, interview by Nils Jacobson, 1998, archived in All About Jazz, 2005.

Morris on his book “The Properties of Free Music”

PF: Was it more difficult to codify this stuff than you thought when you started? After all, isn't much of this usually learned by doing?

Morris: Well, you know, yes it's difficult to approach this, because of a couple of things that are sort of implicit in your question. First, there's the notion that it's impossible to explain it. Second, there's the idea that it's wrong to attempt to explain it. Those two things combine to suggest that it shouldn't be attempted. And again, I have students and people in my own groups and my own music to deal with, where I wanted to know what this really is. I want to move forward with knowledge, I don't want to be blindly wandering around repeating things and thinking that it's innovation, which I see all the time. I want to have as much understanding of this as someone would have about writing, or biology, or interpreting classical music. I think it's a strange phenomenon in free music that people assume that the more naïve you are, the better situated you are to be creative. I think that's absurd, frankly, and I think my book pretty much states that I feel that way. So on the one hand, that was a challenge in terms of approaching it, but the other thing was to figure out how to approach it to allow the open-ended elements of it, the legitimate open-ended elements of it, to remain. In other words, to make it something that wasn't a method book, and wasn't philosophy.

Joe Morris, interview by Phil Freeman for Burning Ambulance, 2012.