

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

David Keffer, Professor
Dept. of Materials Science & Engineering
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996-2100
dkeffer@utk.edu
<http://clausius.engr.utk.edu/>

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”.



Jim O'Rourke

**American guitarist, vocalist, electronics player & composer
(January 18, 1969–)**

O'Rourke on "Tamper"

O'Rourke: "Noone else at school was interested in doing tape music, so the school was mine all the time. Tamper was recorded on 20-year old tape, because I couldn't afford to buy tape. My friend's dad was in The Flock, the original band before Chicago and Blood Sweat and Tears, and he gave me all these old rehearsal tapes, which I recorded Tamper over.

"When I did Tamper, it was all about how acoustic instruments, like the piano, are so defined that people don't listen to their actual sound any more. They listen to a piano playing something as opposed to hearing 15 minutes of sound. I wanted to try to make acoustic instrumental pieces, but by mixing and miking it in such a way that the definitions of the instruments would be gone. One of the things that depresses me about that album is that no-one's ever come up to me and said, 'I can't hear the fucking oboes there, where are they?' Except for the first few minutes of the CD, where there's a low, low oscillator, it's just acoustic instruments. In the second piece, the first six minutes are just oboes, but there are no attacks or decays, because I'd have, say, eight oboe parts and I'd have mapped on a piece of graph paper where each attack occurred, so the things that sound like drones aren't - they're constant crossfadings. There's nothing on the entire record which last more than 10 or 20 seconds, but nobody ever says anything, which is one reason I'm so depressed about that record."

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Brian Duguid, 1995.

O'Rourke on Musique Concrète

O'Rourke: "Rules of Reduction is mostly for me about how musique concrète is one of the few genres that's so inexorably tied to a certain school of thought, the French school of thought. As an American growing up, listening to and being interested in musique concrete, I had no actual history, nothing to relate to aesthetically. There's no American history of musique concrete. American and French aesthetics are not the same. So I had to deal with the question of a medium where the signifiers are so tightly tied to one way of thinking. How could I deal with that formally? So the piece really deals with what the expectations of musique concrete are. Luc Ferrari's really the only composer of the original French musique concrete school who started dealing with what the sounds meant. The others wanted to avoid that, to take the sounds and move them into the abstract. "Rules of Reduction sounds French, but what happens within the piece is very anti-French. I got into really big trouble when they premiered it in Paris. In France there's 'l'image', the idea of taking the sounds and removing them out of everyday reality into some sort of fantasy. Every single time in my piece that the sounds try to do that, I counteract it. Like when the saxophones come out of the car horn, which is a classic musique concr,te technique, I completely cut it cold. The piece eventually gives up, with this piano crap at the end. Every time there's a sense of reverie and nostalgia, another common thing in musique concrète, it never gets there, it's just a series of dead ends.

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Brian Duguid, 1995.

O'Rourke on Genres

Q: How do you feel about the reaction to the album? It's a relatively straightforward song-oriented record, but a lot of the reaction has been focused on questions of avant-garde music vs. pop music and the differences between the two. Do you think there should be any?

O'Rourke: Well, that's the thing. Why do they have to be different? I don't understand this obsession with genre. I'm interested in people doing certain things with music, not people who are working in certain genres. When I'm into someone's music it's because they're someone who has decided they're going to hold off on doing what comes naturally, to see if there is some other way they don't know about yet. That's what I'm looking for. That's why Autechre is as interesting as Derek Bailey to me. They are people who made that decision, whether it's an overt political decision, like with Bailey, or just a result of being smart, articulate people like the guys in Autechre.

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Andy Battaglia, 1999.

O'Rourke on Stupid

Q: It's funny you mentioned that, because that's the moment I'm leading up to. When I hear that [Ken Vandermark saxophone] solo [in Through the Night Slowly] it sounds like the ending credits on "Saturday Night Live."

O'Rourke: (Ecstatic) Exactly! That's exactly what it's supposed to be. That's brilliant. Fantastic. That's 100 percent what I was going for. I remember recording it and saying "No, Ken, stupider...stupider." He kept saying, "Aw Jim, come on." But what most people have heard is Pink Floyd's "The Great Gig in the Sky" from Dark Side of the Moon, which I can understand because the drumming was purposefully supposed to sound like Nick Mason. That's why I used a different drummer on that song. But it is supposed to feel like "Saturday Night Live." That interests me partially because it's a cultural reference taken out of its context but also because it's just stupid. I like stupid stuff. I have to admit it's also slightly a parody of a Gastr del Sol song for me. The cliched poignant piano on that song is just ridiculous. What is so poignant about a piano humping out a bunch of chords, you know? So that tune is mostly made up of jokes. But it had to work musically of course.

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Andy Battaglia, 1999.

O'Rourke on Avoiding Expectations

AVC: Thinking about music as a set of problems and solutions is a big part of what you do. And this time, you took to playing everything yourself and putting it together in pieces. Do you think of yourself as a formalist?

O'Rourke: Formalist? Maybe cranky old man. [Laughs.] It's not so much that I think formally about it. It's like what I was saying earlier: I'm almost pathologically trying to trip myself up, because I don't want to see things the way I've seen them before. Usually the result—what people hear—is partially where I've gotten to when I surprised myself. It's a natural part of how I work. If anything, I approach things probably like a critic.

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Andy Battaglia, 2009 for the AV Club.

O'Rourke on Problems in Music-Making

AVC: What is the primary “problem” in music-making? Is it that so often there are conventional patterns that play out without people being aware of that they’re following them?

O'Rourke: That’s a symptom of the problem, to me. For me, the main problem in music-making is “How can I find a way to step outside my own experience so I can find a different way to stand, and then see everything in a different light?” That to me is the main thing. What you were saying—those are sort of like symptoms of not doing that, of not forcing yourself to look at something from a different perspective. It may be a waste of time. There may be nothing interesting about it at all. But that question of how can you step outside your own experience to see this from a different light—that’s in the music I like the most. It’s not so much like, “Oh, I’ve never heard anything like that before.” It’s like, “I’ve never heard anything like that before.” You know what I mean? [Laughs.] “That completely changed where I’m sitting in relation to music, and to what this music represents.” It sounds silly, but I really love later Led Zeppelin. That stuff really surprised me when I heard it as a kid. I’m just thinking of something that works for everyone on a grand scale. It took a left turn, I guess you could say.

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Andy Battaglia, 2009 for the AV Club.

O'Rourke on Songs with 200 Tracks

AVC: There are 200 tracks on parts of the new album [The Visitor]. How did you get up that high? Was layering a goal?

O'Rourke: Well, it wasn't like I was going for 200 tracks. There are just points where the arrangement has a string section and a horn section, as well as two drum sets... Because I have to play everything myself instead of recording a couple string players, I had to record each individual part. A couple parts, just recording the string section alone was like 30 tracks, because I had to play it 30 times. And then the horn section, I had to record another 20 tracks, because I had to play all the parts myself. It was more just practical that it got that big. If anything, when it came time to mix, I looked and went, "Jesus Christ!" It wasn't an aesthetic decision to get that big. I mean, there were a couple trombone parts in there, and I can't play trombone. For like half a year, I was looking for some other instrument color that would work. And finally I was just like, "It's got to be trombone." So I bought a trombone, and I practiced for a couple months, and I got to the point where I could play the parts correctly. I think it was only like 10 seconds of trombone on there, but I spent six months on that 10 seconds. [Laughs.]

Interview with Jim O'Rourke by Andy Battaglia, 2009 for the AV Club.