

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”.



Evan Parker

**British saxophonist
(April 5, 1944–)**

Parker on the saxophone as a bio-feedback instrument

In the end, the saxophone has been for me a rather specialized bio-feedback instrument for studying and expanding my control over my hearing and the motor mechanics of parts of my skeleto-muscular system, and their improved functioning has given me more to think about. Sometimes the body leads the imagination and sometimes the imagination leads the body.

Evan Parker

Liner notes from “monoceros” rereleased on Chronoscope Records in 1999.

Parker's Philosophy

LP: Do you have a philosophy that you try to impart among students or young musicians?

EP: I think that that's a very hard thing to sum up in a few sentences during an interview. Yea, I won't attempt that.

LP: So it is important to you but there is a lot of depth to it.

EP: Well, they say that a donkey carrying a lot of books is still a donkey. I might be one of those.

Evan Parker, interview.

From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Parker: The Music Is Its Own Explanation

And I suppose by the same token the music is its own best explanation. We can talk for another five hours and we still wouldn't really explain the music. The music explains itself. And by exposure to the music and by exposure to the history of the music, this is the way somebody will come to an understanding of how the music works. But if they don't like the sound of it, why should they bother and I'm the first to agree. If you don't like the sound of it, don't bother. I'm not proselytizing in that sense except by being there and being ready to play. But I'm not trying to convert people who don't have a degree of initial curiosity. It's very common to find the first reaction of, "The first time I heard you I thought you were crazy. I don't know what made me come back. Something made me come back. And now, I think I get it or now I think you're the greatest thing on the planet." This is the kind of pattern that I hear from people. They have not necessarily fallen in love with it or get it the very first time that they hear it, but there is something about it that fascinates them and brings them back and it's only a small percentage. So again, we're repeating elements of the answers to previous questions but it's all one question in the end I guess.

Evan Parker, interview.

From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Parker on who the Music is for

LP: With many jazz musicians, the listener is a consideration when the piece is developed on paper. However, with your music, I hear someone that is taking a form and looking for all the possibilities of development of that form.

EP: First of all, it has to be for the people I'm playing with and for myself, but it has to be right and if it's right, then it's ready for other people if they're interested. But if I start thinking about what people would like then this would indulge in the most absurd kind of generalization about other human beings. That's part of the thinking that's taking the planet the wrong way. People thinking that they know how a lot of other people think. I don't know how people think but I know how I think and I know how the musicians that I work with think well enough in order to organize a concert or two. Beyond that, it's a question of individual choices about other people's responses of whether they choose to come or whether they choose to do something else. That's up to them...

Evan Parker, interview.

From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Parker on Failing in an Interesting Way

You cannot get angry if the music doesn't come out at a certain place or a certain way. It's just not a very intelligent thing for somebody interested in improvisation to do. to accept that you're only partially in control of the result and you have to enjoy that, the risk and the risk sometimes means failing. Ok, not failing too badly but failing in an interesting way. Not always making it clear where you consider the failure to have been and if somebody wants to go through the records, they'll see and find out that well, it didn't last long or that lasted hell of a long time. What's the difference between those two things? Again, it's the critic's job to do that, not for me to explain all these mysteries beyond a certain point you know. I can give you a clue but I can't tell you the whole answer.

Evan Parker, interview.

From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Parker's Philosophy

LP: Do you have a philosophy or some way of looking at life that you would be willing to share?

Parker: I would say that the most profound influences in terms of my view would be John Coltrane, Idries Shah and Charles Muses. Perhaps coming a little further down the line would be political philosophers like Bakunin and Kropotkin; contemporaries of Marx who were critical of his theories and for very good reasons that have subsequently been proven to be right. Muses says in his book "Destiny and Control in Human Systems" that the great tragedy of our times is that too many people spend their lives doing work that is contrary to their own natures. That might be it in a nutshell.

Evan Parker, interview.

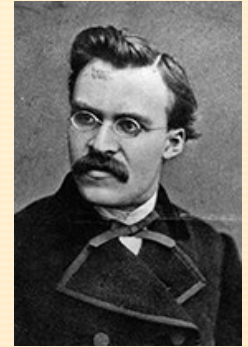
From Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

Trio of Quotes on Purpose and Individuality

To forget one's purpose is the commonest form of stupidity.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

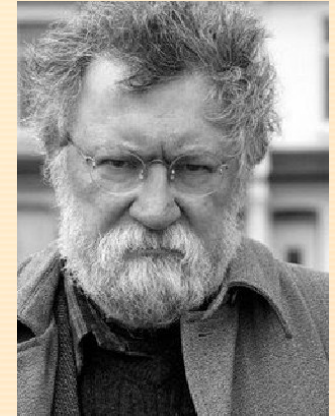
from Human, All too Human, (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister*), Part II: Assorted Opinions and Maxims (Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche), II.206, 1879.



The great tragedy of our times is that too many people spend their lives doing work that is contrary to their own natures.

--Evan Parker

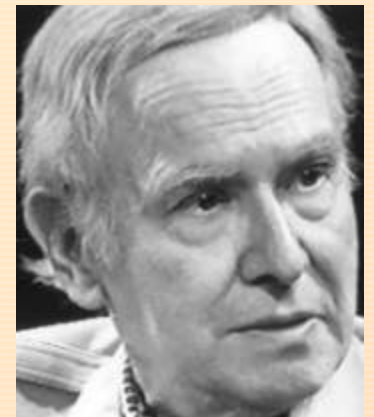
from Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006, p. 242.



In fact, our greatest contribution to others, and to our self-development as well, lies in the direction of developing precisely along the lines where our greatest uniqueness lies.

--Charles Musès

from Destiny and Control in Human Systems Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, Boston, 1985, p. 171.



The Central Mystery

MD: When you're playing, particularly improvising, how conscious are you? That's probably the wrong expression, but is it somewhat like a trance state? Are some things fairly mechanical?

Parker: This is the central mystery to me, really. I'm still not clear how it works, but I have taken to talking about left brain/right brain states of dominance. Once more than a certain number of events per second are being generated by the group or by individuals, how those streams of events interact to form a sense of a whole—you know, a group music as opposed to just some people doing something at the same time—is very mysterious. I really don't know how it works. All I know is that it does work, and that there's a huge difference between people just doing some stuff at the same time and what happens when I improvise with people that are experienced at free improvisation...

Evan Parker, interview by Martin Davidson, April 1997.

Originally published in *Opprobrium* 4. Reprinted in *The Heraclitean Two-Step, etc.* False Walls, Faversham, Kent, United Kingdom, 2024, p. 19.

No Theory

Parker: There must be a process which means I phrase this way, or choose notes that way, or choose dynamics or attacks or whatever it is... I feel that I have a pragmatic grasp of what is required in order to bring about or to be an effective participant in each of those situations. There is no theory to explain it. I'm very happy that there isn't. Perhaps there could be, but it would look very pretentious written down. I may already have overstepped the mark of what can look reasonable in print—I hope not.

Evan Parker, interview by Martin Davidson, April 1997.

Originally published in *Opprobrium* 4. Reprinted in *The Heraclitean Two-Step, etc.* False Walls, Faversham, Kent, United Kingdom, 2024, pp. 19-20.

Diversities of Ideas

Parker: I look at it like—if we all did the same thing and had the same approach, this would rapidly deteriorate into the most boring scene imaginable. The most important thing is that there are diversities of approach, and the best way of ensuring that is to support other people's ideas as fully as you can, and hope that they will do the same thing for your ideas.

Evan Parker, interview by Martin Davidson, April 1997.
Originally published in *Opprobrium* 4. Reprinted in *The Heraclitean Two-Step, etc.*
False Walls, Faversham, Kent, United Kingdom, 2024, p. 21.

Theme and Variations

Parker: In a way, it's a return to a kind of analogue of theme and variations, if you want to look at it like that. It's a rather perverse way of describing it perhaps, but there is something like that going on—the theme is always the same theme, and the variations are those details. The theme is the freedom, the absence of any of the normal fixed points of reference—that's the theme. The variations are the things that become fixed in the particular situation regardless.

Evan Parker, interview by Martin Davidson, April 1997.

Originally published in *Opprobrium* 4. Reprinted in *The Heraclitean Two-Step, etc.* False Walls, Faversham, Kent, United Kingdom, 2024, p. 34.