

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”.



Keith Rowe

**British guitarist,
electronics player
(March 16, 1940—)**

Rowe on Atmosphere



Rowe: I have become increasingly preoccupied with atmosphere, in particular the kind of atmosphere that one finds surrounding a Mark Rothko painting. It seems to me that when one is in the presence of a Rothko work (also after I have departed and later, on further reflection), I'm struck not by "pew! what great brush strokes! what an incredible technique! what a painter!", but instead by a feeling of the surrounding atmosphere and its sensation.

Somehow I wanted to move what I'm doing (intention) towards the notion of atmosphere, an activity where we're not aware of technique, of instrument, of playing, of music even, but instead as feeling/sensation suspended in space, perhaps what Feldman meant by music as time, energizing the air, making the silence (unintention) audible.

Rowe on Painting vs Music

DW: Back at art school though did you already sense there was a link between your own painting and the music you felt you would go on to create?

Rowe: I ditched the painting in the end. The commodity aspect of it. It seemed to me that a painting was a kind of very elaborate bank note, a kind of commodity. About 1961 I kicked that into touch. With music I didn't have the commodity, I didn't have the luggage of the canvas. I hit the guitar and made a note, and the note disappeared into air, I didn't have anything. It was completely fluid. I could constantly change it. I really enjoyed that.

interview by Dan Warburton, 2001.

Rowe on Finding his Own Voice

Rowe: In painting school, you have to find out who you are, what is unique about you, what you have to say. You can't take a canvas and paint a Georges Braque, or a Picasso, someone else's paintings.. it's an impossibility. One of the great lessons for me was the professor pointing right into my nose saying, "Rowe, you cannot paint a Caravaggio. Only Caravaggio can paint Caravaggio." Suddenly trying to play guitar like Jim Hall seemed quite wrong.. Who am I? What do I have to say? I probably thought about that for between five and eight years, just constantly reflecting on how to do it, and, in a flash, I found the solution. Look at the American school of painting, which was very provincial in the 1800s: they really wanted to do something original but didn't know how to do it, the clue was to get rid of European painting, but how could they ditch European painting, what did they have to do to do that? And Jackson Pollock did it - he just abandoned the technique. How could I abandon the technique? Lay the guitar flat! All that it's doing is angling the body [of the guitar] from facing outwards to facing upwards - the strings remain horizontal, the strings are the same.

interview by Dan Warburton, 2001.

Rowe on Radio and Cheap Guitars

DW: You've said elsewhere that the radio introduces into your music certain aspects of daily life, which has political connotations, of course. How has your use of the radio in performance evolved over the years?

Rowe: Originally I played the radio directly into the amplifier, and later on I got a very basic mixer and put it through that. Then I found a way of actually passing the signal through the guitar pickups, so it becomes part of the guitar. I've become probably more interested in degraded sounds, not working with very fine material. I'd never buy an expensive radio. I prefer the cheap ones. That goes back to the political thing we were talking about. Having a very expensive guitar when people in other places are very poor I find an obscenity. I don't like that. I use a cheap wooden imitation of an American model.

interview by Dan Warburton, 2001.

Rowe on Rehearsing

Rowe: AMM has never rehearsed. We meet up in airports. I don't rehearse. I never practise. I never take the guitar from the case. I only ever touch the guitar in the context of performances, unless I rewire the pick ups.

interview by Dan Warburton, 2001.

Rowe on Collaborating

JR: When you're playing with people, how quick is your reaction time? When someone does something, can you react, [snaps fingers]? Or do you have to pre-plan...?

Rowe: I think your reaction times are very fast. In fact, it's a skill to have four or five simultaneous possibilities and you're only actually utilizing one of them, and you have something in the background that you can bring out straight away. For me, I would never try to react in that sense. I have the capability of reacting in that sense, but I much prefer having a schema you are running through, but a schema that has an ambiguity and open-endedness, which will automatically accept almost any other activity along side it.

interview by Josh Ronsen, 2007.

Rowe on the Lure of Electronics

JR: When you use electronics, do you experiment to find something to use, or do you use them because you want a certain feature?

Rowe: The thing is, the electronics, and I'm not absolutely sure about this, allow for a degree of abstraction in music which somehow I never felt was there with acoustic instruments. Maybe it is only the difference between lyrical and hard-edged abstraction, but there is something about the abstraction which really attracted me right from an early age. I think with the abstraction, because you don't have a lot of the other craft/technique elements with electronics, you can have a degree of fluidity in what you're doing which I really enjoy. I think electronics allows a modular approach to music as human performance and to reroute stuff not only completely fresh before you start but also during the performance. David Tudor was the great genius at that.

interview by Josh Ronsen, 2007.

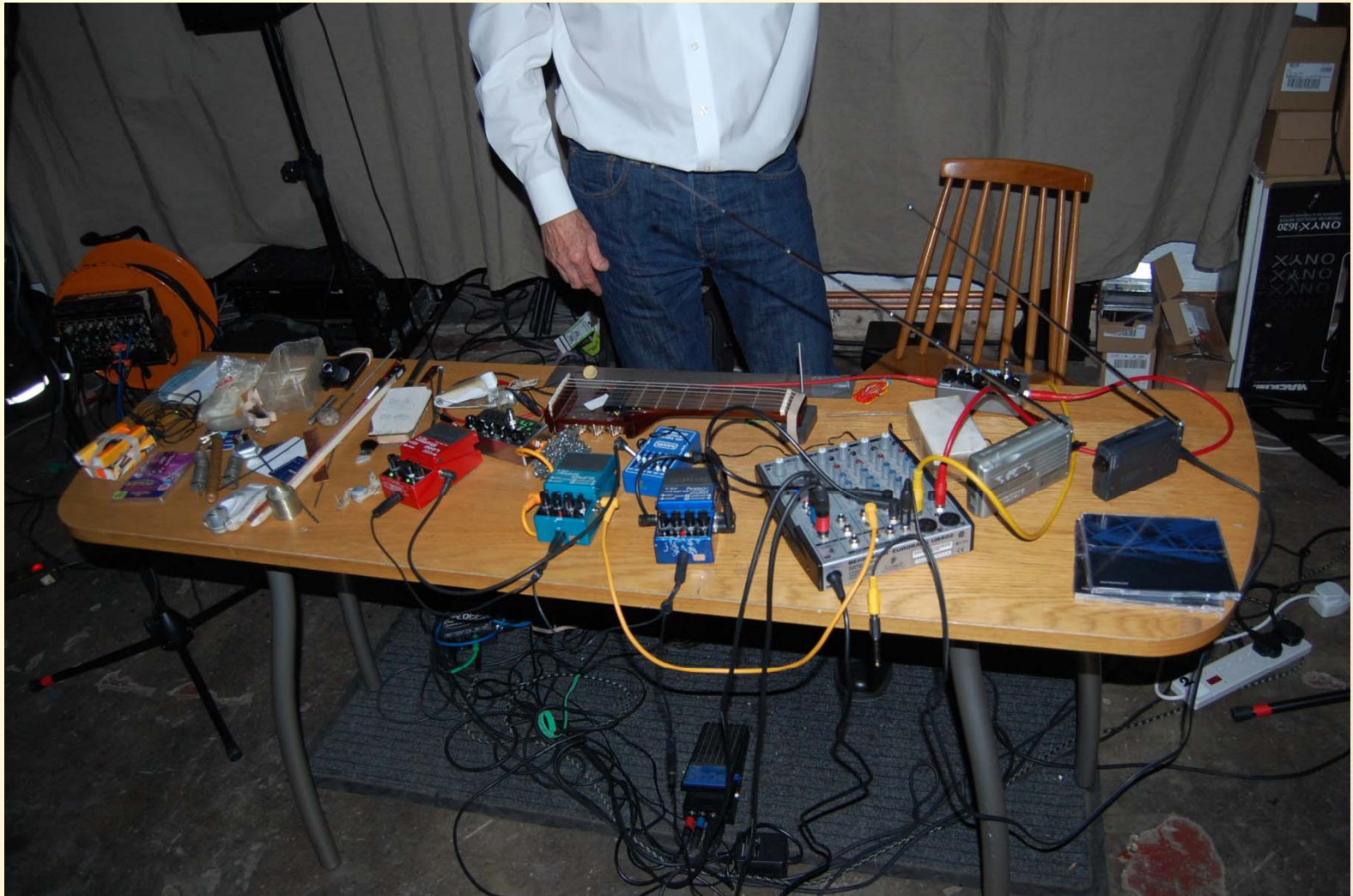
Rowe on Music as Painting

Rowe: In a sense, I've always considered what I do on the guitar as an act of painting. At the very least the process of painting.



interview by Josh Ronsen, 2007.

Rowe on the Castration of the Guitar



<http://photos.allaboutjazz.com/?tag=keith+rowe>

Rowe on the Castration of the Guitar

Rowe: At this point, I won't mention names but just recently I saw a guitarist playing in a trio and the guitar seemed to be masturbatory. I think there is something in the way the guitar has been a masturbatory instrument, very phallic with the hand going up and down. So some years ago I decided to castrate the guitar, in fact; I cut the neck off which is a symbol of castration. Maybe someone could actually write something about the fact that as old men get older their penises reduce, so maybe you can tell something by looking at the instrument on the table.

interview by John Eyles, All About Jazz, 2009.

Rowe on Tension

AAJ: Sometimes tension can be a driver of creativity. Was there any sense of that?

Rowe: That is true. I would say that in AMM there was a chemical mismatch between me and Eddie, like two brothers who really don't hate each other but detest each other. Actually there is that sort of tension. We solved that by usually having a classical musician; we always invited classical musicians as a kind of catalyst for this relationship. As long as we controlled the relationship, everything was okay. We could have gone on for a hundred years. This one was just unfortunate.

interview by John Eyles, All About Jazz, 2009.

Rowe on his Ideal for a Performance

Rowe: You know the story of the Venerable Bede when someone asked him about human existence. He said imagine a banqueting hall; it is winter and it is dark outside; a bird flies in one window, through the banqueting hall and out the other window. This is life. I would like a performance to be like that. So it transcends the question of being Art or not, or technique or brilliance. It is absolutely what it is, a mirror of the whole of our existence. So, this is one bird flying through.

interview by John Eyles, All About Jazz, 2009.