

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”.



John Zorn

American saxophonist & composer
(September 2, 1953–)

Zorn on being an Outsider

How do you see your own place in the scheme of things?

ZORN: I look out at the world and I see chaos. And that's kind of the formula for being an outsider. You don't want to be an outsider, you want to belong and you're burdened with these human frailties. You need companionship; you need food and drink; you need a nice place to sleep; you want to be understood even though you're doing something that's a little difficult; you want your work to be appreciated; you want to be loved. We're burdened with this. But what we're doing is we're creating something that is a little bit scary to most people. It challenges their view of the world. Most people think the world is a perfectly ordered place and they love it. The outsider looks at that and goes, "Man, this is chaos. This makes no sense at all." And then, they try to tell the truth. And they're compelled to tell the truth. They can't help but tell the truth by some inner sense of responsibility.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2000 published in Jazz Times.

Zorn on Courage

Because you are 46 and there are 23-year-old musicians who are being fiercely independent today because of the groundwork that you laid 20 years ago. I'm thinking of [saxophonist] Briggan Krauss, who has mentioned you in interviews as a huge influence. By example, you have helped him and other young musicians like him to be brave enough to do what they do, against all odds.

ZORN: Yeah, well, that's what it takes— courage. It takes more courage than most people have. There's less than one percent of people like that, but the world could not exist without them. The world would not move forward without them, and I really believe that. I think the outsiders, the individualists, the people who have a messianic belief in themselves and are able to stick with their vision despite all odds—and believe me, Bill, every day of my life I'm haunted and tormented by the voices of people that are saying in my ear, "Maybe you're wrong." But the people that can stick with that, they're the ones that are really going to make a difference in the world. And they will always be a small number and I've always aspired to be one of that number. I think about the people that I admire, people like Jack Smith, who lived in a small apartment right over here on First Avenue and died of AIDS 10 years ago. I worked with him for about eight years in the late '70s helping him with his theater performances that never more than 10 people attended. And, I mean, this was some of the greatest shit I ever experienced. Here was a guy my age performing for 10 people. And I think about John Cage not getting an orchestra commission until he was over 50 years old. When he was my age he was still working as a dishwasher, you know? I think about that and I say, "Those are the models. I've gotta live up to that." And if I can in any way inspire someone else, then the line gets passed on and that's beautiful. That's great. I really hope that it's happening.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2000 published in Jazz Times.

Zorn on the Power of Independent Artists

JazzTimes: And yet the fiercely independent artist persists in the face of this adversity and in some cases continues to thrive.

Zorn: There will always be independent artists, there will always be some freak that says, "This is not right, I'm gonna do it my way." There will always be experimental music. There will always be people who wanna listen to it. But I just don't see them taking over the world, you know? Maybe when I was 22 years old I thought we were gonna take over the world, that this was the real music. But now that I have a perspective and I'm 46, I look back and I say, "Look at the history." Look at thousands of years of how it's been and how people are manipulated and how greed functions in our society.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2000 published in Jazz Times.

Zorn on Music Corporations

JazzTimes: But then there are people like yourself and Tim Berne who have taken it upon themselves to push their statements forward on their own terms with their own independent labels.

Zorn: I agree, but we're all too rare. I mean, I'm doing what I believe in. I'm trying to do what I think is the right thing, the honorable thing. I'm trying to support the music that I believe in because nobody else is either able or interested in doing it. But do I think that in the new millennium that that is going to take over? No, I'm not so naive as to believe that we can turn the world around. I think this is the way the world has been since the first caveman picked up a rock and knocked someone over the head and said, "I'm the king of the hill." Greed is a basic part of human makeup and greedy people are usually the ones that push everybody around. And in the time of the pharaohs it was done with violence. Today it's done in much more insidious ways. It's done with brainwashing and brain-control. These marketing guys who are at the head of all these companies, they're really the ones that are spoon-feeding everybody shit. And I don't really see much hope of turning that around because they've been thinking about how to fuck us for so much longer than we could imagine thinking about. They think about that as long as we think about making good music.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2000 published in Jazz Times.

Zorn on the Marketability of Non-Idiomatic Music

JazzTimes: Do you think this music, whether it's called the avant garde or experimental music, can be promoted properly and sold in greater numbers?

Zorn: Every once in a while someone comes along who thinks that they can sell this music to a large group of people, but that will never happen. By definition it's for a small group of people. And I'm perfectly fine with that. I have no bitterness.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2000 published in Jazz Times.

Zorn on Eliminating Distractions

JazzTimes: And I remember thinking when I said that, “He probably doesn’t even have a TV.”

Zorn: Right. Well, this is actually not so difficult to understand. The world is filled with distractions, and we understand why it’s good for the government, especially in an administration like Bush’s, to bamboozle people and keep them distracted from getting together and saying, “Wait a minute! What is going on here?!” I choose not to be distracted. I figured out, I guess sometime in the past 20 or 30 years, exactly what it was that was very distracting about our society and what was stopping me from making work. And I managed in a very simple way to cut that out. I’m not sticking my head in the sand; I’m just eliminating anything that gets in the way of making work. That means a lot of sacrificing, even to the extent of, you know, having a family. You have kids, you have to devote half your life to your children to be a correct parent. I can’t do that. I am devoted to my work. So my children are the compositions, the records, the performances. And my family? That’s the musical community. And that’s why it’s not an unusual thing for me to create the Stone or create Tzadik. That’s what a father would do to put clothes on the back of their children or make sure they get to a good school or protect them if they’re being bullied.

I’m here to help the community that nurtured me. And that’s why no TV; that’s why I don’t read magazines or newspapers. I focus on the art that I’m doing. That’s my gift for the world; that’s why I’m on the planet. I’m not a hard-liner and I understand how difficult it is to survive in this world, but at the same time I think the reason I created Tzadik, the reason that the Stone had to happen, the reason that these Arcana books are coming out, the reason that I continue to create work to the extent that I do, is because I created my own avenue.

John Zorn, interview by Bill Milkowski , 2009 published in Jazz Times.