

## ***Celebrating a Jazz Hero: A Symposium on the Role of Fred Anderson in Chicago's Jazz Legacy***

**Wednesday August 19, 2009  
Chicago Cultural Center**

**Panelists: Fred Anderson, Tatsu Aoki, Douglas Ewart,  
Tsehaye GERALYN Hébert, George Lewis, Paul Steinbeck, Francis Wong**

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*One of many events held in 2009 to mark Fred Anderson's eightieth birthday, "Celebrating a Jazz Hero" was co-organized by Lauren Deutsch of the Jazz Institute of Chicago and Michael Orlove of the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Six panelists joined Anderson to discuss his life and legacy before an audience at the Chicago Cultural Center. The symposium began with a brief interview of Anderson by panelist Paul Steinbeck.*

**Paul Steinbeck:** I'm going to be asking Fred a few questions about his work as a performance-space operator, as a musician, and as a part of the Chicago community. Hopefully that will provide a foundation for the open-ended discussion that will follow. So I'll start with a question about the Velvet Lounge, where many of you have probably stopped and heard some wonderful music.<sup>2</sup> Fred, many musicians dream about owning a nightclub or performance space. You've actually done it, for more than twenty-five years, as the owner and operator of the Velvet Lounge. In your opinion, what is the mission of the Velvet Lounge?

**Fred Anderson:** The mission of the Velvet Lounge is to preserve this great tradition. I started recognizing the music when I was very young—that was bebop, right after the Second World War. When I first heard that music, it was so exciting. I just fell in love with it, you know, and I wanted to play it. So I just picked up the saxophone and started trying to play.

The Velvet Lounge was something that I thought about later, right after I came back from overseas in 1977 and 1978—we should have a space for the musicians to play. Muhal and I had discussed it with the AACM, to have a space to play our own music. And we talked about it at a place called Fifth Jack's. I didn't dream I would play the first concert of the AACM, but that's what happened. When I came back in 1977 from overseas—I was over there with an Austrian group, a trio—I got the idea to have my own place, and I started working on it. I think myself and two Sharons—at that particular time her name was Sharon Friedman, and the other lady I can't remember her last name, but her name was Sharon too. We got this space down on Lincoln Avenue, 4512 North Lincoln. It was a sub-lease thing. The guy had moved out and he sub-leased it to me. He paid half of the rent and I paid half, which was \$400—I paid \$200 and he paid \$200. But anyway, we just went in and tried to present music at 4512 North Lincoln Avenue. Then later on, I started researching about what was happening over at Minton's, where all of the musicians used to gather and play—all of the great musicians, like Ben Webster, Lester Young, all of them, Monk and all of them. So basically that's what gave me the idea of having a place like the Velvet Lounge.

And after that folded up, I managed to move to 2128 1/2 South Indiana. I had been working there for quite a while. The gentleman, who was a good friend of mine, asked me to work for him. That was right after I came back from overseas, and I was there from 1979, right after the Lincoln Avenue Birdhouse closed. And then when it fell in my hands, that's when I really decided to have a space for the musicians. It really started out being a tavern, but by me being a musician and losing a lot of customers, I started playing music in there. So that's really what happened with that venue. And we've been going. I didn't realize I was going to stay there for twenty-five years. But I did. But anyway, it was fun—we had jam sessions, and it just evolved as a space for musicians to come and play.

**Paul Steinbeck:** What did you learn during your early years as an owner and operator of these spaces that contributed to the success and longevity of the Velvet Lounge?

**Fred Anderson:** Things was changing all the time, so you got to try to figure out how to stay in business, find new customers, and do new things. You couldn't just let things go down. By me being a musician, the best thing I *know*, and I think I do pretty good, is play music. That's when we started playing music in there. Then we started having after-festival jam sessions. I think Southend Music Works was going at that particular time. A cat named Leo

Krumpholtz came over and told me, "Why don't you start the after-festival [sessions]?" So things just started evolving around different circumstances that was happening at that particular time.

**Paul Steinbeck:** Ever since the fifties and sixties, you have invited younger musicians to rehearse, perform, and record with you. What has motivated you to serve as a mentor for younger musicians?

**Fred Anderson:** Well, I didn't really consider myself a mentor, I just wanted somebody to play with, and they all found me. I remember when George graduated from college. He called me up one day. I was living at 1810 Wesley in Evanston, in my house—I was out there for twenty years—and George called me and he said, "Man, can I play with your band?" I said, "You want to play with *my band*? Man, you don't need to play with my band." He said, "Yeah, I want to play," and that's how that started. So we kind of came together.

Douglas, I think I ran into him down at a place called Alice's, called him up on stage one night. I think me and Steve McCall and Lester Lashley was playing the gig down there, and he came up and played. So it just started evolving with the musicians who wanted to play, who was excited about the music. By that time the AACM was going—this was in the seventies.

**Paul Steinbeck:** In the Chicago community and beyond, you are very well known for your dedication to practicing and improving yourself as a musician. Tell me about your practice routine—specifically, the exercises that you developed about forty years ago.

**Fred Anderson:** I'm going to tell you how that came about. I was going to a little school down in the Loop called Roy Knapp's, you know, I was studying theory. I had started learning a lot of theory on my own. When I got in the theory class, I found out it was a lot of kids. I was the oldest one there, and I knew more than a lot of them knew about theory. [The instructor was] a guy named Al Poskonka. He told me a lot of things about what he thought Charlie Parker was doing. So I just took the little things that he told me about, and one day it just came to me that I can do certain things. He was telling me about how [for] the bebop musicians everything was even.

Later on I started listening to a lot of interviews. Bird was basically talking about how he wanted everything to be nice and clean so people could understand it—he was [talking] about melody. So I decided to write these exercises that I had thought about. It was all *theory*—I wrote them out but I had to *play* them to understand what was happening. After I started playing them, things started moving. I could start in a lot of different places, and I didn't have to start in one spot. I could start anywhere and play. So this was the whole idea. Later on, I just started working and working and working, and it started making a lot of sense to me.

**Paul Steinbeck:** Can you tell me a little bit about your compositional process—how you started writing music, and how that relates to your practice routine?

**Fred Anderson:** Well, it all came out of those exercises. That's the way I heard it. Those compositions, that's the way I heard it. I didn't really think about compositions. I was just thinking about trying to play those exercises and use some kind of continuity to make it sound like music, with rhythm and all of the components that go along with doing a song. I wasn't really thinking about composition at that particular time, I was just thinking about making something so it would sound good together, with continuity and everything, just by listening to what them cats was doing. I didn't realize that I was doing that until later on, you know. And then when I wrote that song "Saxoon," we went to Europe with it. We played it at the Moers Festival, and I think George played with me on that. And then before that, George wrote [down] two of my compositions and I played them in Europe. This was before we got to Moers. That's the way I heard the music, and that's what happened.

**Paul Steinbeck:** Do you consider yourself to be an educator?

**Fred Anderson:** Not really, not the regular kind of educator. I just figured I'd get some people together and I'd just share what I know. We'd just talk and we'd do it together, figure out things together.

**Paul Steinbeck:** You may not consider yourself an educator, but you *are* simultaneously a performer and a bandleader, a mentor to many, and an arts presenter. What motivates you, what passion moves you to be so active in so many different areas?

**Fred Anderson:** What motivates me? I practice all the time, and the only way you're going to get anything is to practice and to work on your craft. You've got to work on it, you've got to work on the scales, you've got to work on

the continuity. It's like a puzzle, you just have to put all of these things together. And you don't put them all together at one time—they come a little at a time, you know what I mean? You've got to have a lot of patience, and figure it out by listening to what these guys were doing. I can't sit here and say I knew what Bird was doing, what these other guys were doing. But I know they were very dedicated. They worked and they put things together as they went along in life. It was just basically what happened during the circumstances of my life.

**Paul Steinbeck:** What has life as a musician taught you about life in general?

**Fred Anderson:** Patience, sincerity, and consistency—you've got to have that.

**Paul Steinbeck:** Patience, sincerity, and consistency. Can you expand on those notions a little bit?

**Fred Anderson:** Work, and believe in yourself, and believe in what you've got. Believe in yourself, and have confidence in what you're doing, if you hear it and you work on it. Yeah, you're going to play a lot of things that you don't like, you're going to hit some notes that you don't like. But you're going to keep working on it and figure out how you can make it work. I'm going over some of my tunes now, and I didn't even realize that they were flowing like that, but that's the way I heard them. And then when I leave and go to Europe and play one of the largest festivals in Europe, and go over there with my tunes, I had to have some *guts*, some nerves too! But anyway, you've got to believe it, you know. And I think the AACM, that kind of helped me. When Muhal and I were talking about having our own tunes and writing our own music, I had wrote a few of those lines before the AACM. That was in the early sixties.

**Paul Steinbeck:** One last question before we invite up our panelists—the theme for today's symposium is your role in Chicago's jazz legacy. Would you like to take a stab at defining your legacy, as you see it?

**Fred Anderson:** Well, my legacy is going to be the Velvet Lounge. All of the people that came through the Velvet Lounge, they have to keep it going, because they're a part of it and they have to keep that legacy going. A lot of them are out playing, and they have to keep it going. I'll put it that way. This is where they started, and this is where they have to let people know that the Velvet Lounge is one of the places where they were able to play their craft, feel confident in what they were doing, and play their own music. So I think that should be my legacy. And it will be going on for generations after generations. That *should* be my legacy—I would like for that to be.

**Paul Steinbeck:** A legacy of empowering yourself and empowering others. Let's have a hand for Fred Anderson.

**Fred Anderson:** Thank you.

*At this point the other panelists entered the conversation.*

**George Lewis:** Well, Fred, here we are—this is your life.

These panelists are all people with longstanding associations with Fred Anderson. Maybe this is meant to be a free-wheeling discussion of that. We could all ask you questions if you like, Fred, or give you our impressions, our testimonials in a way, of your impact on us. I just want to start with a theme that I also think about quite a bit, in relation to your work, in my book on the AACM, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. Tsehay, you have this book sitting there, that's nice—that's sort of a big thing to carry around, and thank you.

**Tsehay Geralyn Hébert:** I was waiting for you to sign it.

**George Lewis:** There is this theme, which I think comes out quite a bit, of what I'm calling auto-didacticism or self-teaching, which I think is fundamental to your work. It's one of the themes you see quite a bit in the AACM, where people go around the established institutions, or the established modes of jazz or other forms of experimental music, and do things on their own, or do things in different ways. In that way you achieve a different result. For example, I didn't see anything in reviewing your work that you had gone on the road with this or that band, or sort of did the standard trajectory of you played for a while with this one and that one, and then you went off to New York and played for a while with this one and that one, and then you got your own band, and then you made records—first with a quartet, and then with a quintet, and then with a big band, and then with a Latin group—and then you start all over again. And the cycle, you know, goes in this stereotyped way forever.

Instead of that, you've always made your own way. And I think what happens is really your example encourages others to make their own way. You said that also explicitly, that you encourage people to make their own way. And you see that in the way that people like me or others—Douglas, whoever, other people who played in your groups—have made their own way.

[You] encouraged them to play basically as long as [they] wanted. I have a lot of tapes of the music, and I cringe at how long some of the solos I made were—incredibly boring for some people, I imagine, to sit there for ten minutes and listen to some trombone fulminations. But without it, there would have been no George Lewis, and no Douglas Ewart, and no Hamid Drake, and other people. I think also one person—I'm taking this actually from a comment made by Sharon Friedman Castlewitz, who's sitting over there, maybe we could give her a round of applause—the comment she made just now to me while you were talking was about how you always manage to gather people around you to create a space, to create an atmosphere—another term that you see in the AACM quite a bit, where people create a supportive atmosphere—because without creating the support, without creating an atmosphere, you can't really create an institution, you can't really create an idea that lives beyond the moment. So could you comment on how you create these kinds of spaces? Is that too much to think about?

**Fred Anderson:** Well, I don't see why it's so unusual, because people just express themselves like they want to express themselves. Whatever they do, they're responsible for it. So why should I make any judgment on what a person should do? Let them do what they feel like is right for them, and create their own path. That's basically what I did. I was responsible for all of the things I did, you know, and I believed in it, so if you believe in it, go for it!

**George Lewis:** Maybe other people could comment, I mean, if you feel like it.

**Douglas Ewart:** I think it's something really special to have somebody that is as open as Fred has been. Because you can play in a lot of bands, and as youngsters we were able to present our compositions right along with a master like Fred Anderson. That was both humbling and strengthening for us as young performers. As George said, we weren't limited in our expressive possibilities playing with Fred. I remember speaking with Fred a couple of months ago, and I said, "Fred, this is one of the few places I know that musicians of all stripes can come and really have open expression." It's hard to be like that, because people are usually critical in one form or another. Many nights, you can see Fred sitting out there in the audience, and he listens very keenly. You know, he can be a man of very few words—not that he doesn't have a lot to say—but he watches and when you least expect it, whenever he gives you a compliment, you'd better hold onto it.

**Tsehaye GERALYN Hébert:** When I came here about forty years ago, I was fresh out of New York, the National Black Theatre. I was doing all of this theatre work. And I entered Northwestern, where everything I learned was to color within the lines. And, if you can, imagine paralleling that with being invited into the rehearsal space with this incredible group of musicians, and there were no lines. I didn't know what to do, where to go, where to put my foot as a dancer. I think the first couple of sessions y'all thought I was shy. I was sitting there trying to figure out what I was hearing, and my brain just exploded. I don't think I can explain it any better. And there was that open space.

Again, as the daughter of a pianist, both of my grandfathers are musicians from Louisiana—they played ragtime, Dixieland jazz—but here I was in a space that didn't have the same codes. I was on new turf. And Fred never hurried, never pushed, never whatever. He just *gave* me something I had never had before. And that was just that open space, to *find* a movement, to find a performance in that. I just look at it as incredible, just being left in the candy store all night, all day, for weeks and months. I just want to thank you for that. The time that I spent with you all has greatly affected my work. It's allowed me to break past so many barriers, as with so many other people. It really just showed me how to *be*, to be in open space.

**Tatsu Aoki:** I think for us too, especially during the time I started to play with Fred, we were seeking for a place to play in Chicago. In many ways, we actually didn't have a place to present our stuff, and the Velvet Lounge was one of the—if not two—one of the only places that we were able to express ourselves in the way we wanted to, and he was always kind enough to let us do it. In my case, he also let me play with him for many, many, many years, and we still do play together. I think that open-mindedness changed our communities and music scenes in Chicago.

**George Lewis:** Here's something I've always wondered about. We're thinking about things in a musical way, but I think a number of people including you [Tatsu Aoki], and Tsehaye Hébert, and others, Douglas, do things beyond or outside the frame of music—you as a filmmaker; Tsehaye as a writer and performance artist; Douglas as a sculptor, instrument maker, and event-maker of large-scale performances. Maybe I could start with you, Tatsu, if you don't mind. How do you feel that your work as a filmmaker integrates with some of the ideas that Fred is working within?

**Tatsu Aoki:** Well, Fred's saxophone playing is really visual. So I always see these pictures when we play together. It really contributed to, and in some ways changed, my film work. But I think aside from the film or the media, I think Fred really taught me the way to live as an artist. Hanging out with him for many years, he's taken me to many different places, we talked a lot, and I think on top of the musical experience I also learned how to be an artist from him. And what I learn from Fred I tell my friends, and they all learn.

**George Lewis:** But what did you learn about being an artist?

**Tatsu Aoki:** I think what he said before: believe in yourself, be consistent, be sincere, and all of that stuff I think I received from his music.

**George Lewis:** Francis, could you—?

**Francis Wong:** I think there's a whole world in the Velvet, and there's a culture in which everyone who comes to the Velvet is participating. To me, the openness—we've been talking about musicians, but everyone's a participant in that scene in the club. You can layer upon that a number of ways of looking at it. One is that it's a drama, it's an unfolding drama. I think from my background and somewhat from Tatsu's background, theatre is such an important part of who we are, and how we invent our culture, and invent our lives here. The drama that unfolds in the Velvet is really a tale of what's best about what we're doing in this country. I don't think I take it for granted.

Tatsu is an immigrant, my parents are immigrants, and in a lot of ways we're looking for a place to play—as a community—a place to participate and have a life. And I have to say that everything my parents were looking for, in terms of coming to America, is *in the Velvet*. It's very symbolic that way. My parents were in this place called Kunming and in Chongqing, which was where the Americans were in China during World War II. And my parents worked with them, and they went to these dances that the GIs, you know, the soldiers, had. And they heard this music, the beginnings of this music. I just think that it's so very lucky that, as the son of immigrants, I can come and be in the Velvet, and even get to play. There's no greater aspiration—it's like "There's No Greater Love"—that can occur, than what occurs at the Velvet. Thank you, Fred, for that.

**George Lewis:** This brings up a very interesting point, actually. I'm reading something right now, a book that's about to come out. There's a lot of stuff right now, a lot of new scholarship on jazz as a global phenomenon. I was actually just in Beijing a couple of weeks ago, and had a chance to talk with a number of musicians there, and the sense that I get from being there with people who own performance spaces, or run them, or people who are trying to bring people to China, is that there's this new kind of post-capitalist, post-socialist scene emerging in which you start to see that there are all kinds of new immigrants and new kinds of confluences, influences and confluences are coming together to re-create jazz, or even a post-jazz notion of a global music. And this is something that many of us have participated in, in one way or another—Fred, with his trips to Europe very early on, in the mid-seventies, Tatsu. All of us have done this, in some way or another.

So I'm just wondering for myself, how does this sort of global notion of new music—or jazz, if we want to limit things in a genre way, just temporarily—square with the ideas about tradition that you guys were just talking about? Fred, maybe I could ask you. You said that the Velvet Lounge, and maybe your work in general, was a space for the preservation of tradition. Now at the same time, people differ about what the preservation of tradition really means. You have people who feel that the way to preserve the tradition is to find a set of things, and stamp those with the name of tradition, and sort of repeat them over and over. That doesn't seem to be what's happening at the Velvet Lounge—people don't seem to be repeating anything, they seem to be creating things over and over. Is that tradition or what?

**Fred Anderson:** Well, my thing is this. I came up during that period, you know, listening to Bird. I heard Bird before I heard and understood Louis Armstrong. But as I looked back, and I looked at the way they set this music up, there are certain things, certain elements, and certain ingredients in that music that there has to be in order to preserve the tradition—the rhythm, the syncopation, and all of that. And I found out when Tatsu came and played, to preserve his music, that there was drums in his music. And I could hear that [his] tradition and our tradition was similar. That's like Diz when he went to Cuba. So you put all of these things together. We all basically need the same things and want the same things. So we just have to get together and play together, and find that there's a lot of things that can be done with music.

As far as the culture thing, you don't have to lose your culture by playing. You can still perform and respect other people's culture. When Hamid and I introduced the tablas, we brought all of these things together. I don't know if we were the first ones to do the tabla thing or not, on that first record we made with Nessa. I used to listen to Ravi

Shankar, I used to listen to all of the classical saxophone players, and I think all of those people like Bird and them, they all listened to classical music. But they found another way of doing it. They just found another way, but they had a lot of respect for everything. So that culture thing, we all have to come together in some kind of way, and that's basically the way I feel about my music. There's a lot that can be done with music.

**Douglas Ewart:** I wanted to just tailgate with something that Fred just mentioned. I can see the relationship between, for example, the kind of drumming that Tatsu is engaged in—*taiko*—and Nyabingi [Drum Choir]. Some of the sounds, and even the size of the drums, are similar. And George had mentioned earlier some of the multidimensional pieces I've been working in and trying to develop. Fred has been a multitasking person for a long time—a businessman, a craftsman in his own right, as somebody that laid carpet, and then somebody that's a self-propelled entrepreneur. And then the sound, I think about the stream of imaginativeness, if there's such a thing, that Fred demonstrates in his playing. I remember those nights when the ideas just flowed out of Fred like somebody just turned a faucet on. You never got tired of hearing him. So those things had really powerful influences on us.

Dedication—we used to play at a place on Wells Street from midnight to four a.m. And we played with the same kind of vigor and exuberance if there was one person in there, or if the place was full. George would come all the way from the South Side, far south, and we had to take several modes of transportation to get to Fred's. The way we were dedicated to doing the music, you would think we were making bags of money—but this was beyond. The compulsion and the perseverance that Fred speaks of is crucial to the kind of success that Fred has achieved.

I wanted to also say that I too am an immigrant, and I think that one of the interesting things about this music is that it's been an "Embraceable You" kind of music, where if you come with a strange instrument or if you come with a different idea you weren't turned aside. Besides musicians, we used to have a lot of poets—poetesses, really, mainly women were reading with us a lot—which is another arena in which Fred was a pioneer. So thanks for those beautiful nights.

**Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert:** I am a migrant, and coming from Louisiana, you all know I'm used to spectacle when it comes to Mardi Gras music. Fred's my homeboy. And I kind of look at the music that happens at the Velvet Lounge as a way of reintroducing America to itself. It's almost like a gumbo for us. You don't throw anything away: everything is folded in and utilized. And that arc is just amazing to me, because I can hear in everything there: I can hear the music that came with the Great Black Migration from the South, I hear Dixieland, I hear jazz of every stripe, I hear the blues, I hear how that's been telescoped out into a wonderful experimental mode that really kind of blew my mind. And when I write, I always have a soundtrack in my head, especially when I'm writing about Chicago. That soundtrack is there, and it's not void of sound, because the music has been so much a part of this city.

I would be remiss if I wouldn't pick up on what Douglas has said. You have to remember, this was back in the day—when folks like us know what "back in the day" was, and not somebody who is twenty [saying] "back in the day" when we were toddlers. Back in the day, Fred was just so open to women artists. It was just incredible. There just wasn't a barrier, like you can't do this, you can't do that. Again, it was such a wide open space. Anybody who felt like they could contribute was invited into that mix.

And I thank you personally, Fred, because I think my time with you all really just opened the box for me. I can't ever go back in that box and only create within those four walls. It's become prismatic, if you will. We've gone from analog to digital and beyond, you know, and being able to humbly sit at this man's feet, and not only listen to him but to be able to move my feet to some of what he's done—and the other female artists who aren't here, like Althea Teamer, Kai El Zabar, Rrata [Christine Jones], who later went on to dance with Urban Bushwomen, all of us cut our teeth with this man's music.

**George Lewis:** I just wanted to remind us all that we're talking about Fred as a person who creates spaces, but a lot of space that's created is based on the power of sound, the logic of sound. Fred does actually, you know, *play* music. And talking about play, at a certain point you start to think about the logic of the actual music. And this is something where, I think, Paul, you've had a great deal to say. I think you and Fred, for example, have published a book of transcriptions of Fred Anderson's solos. Could you talk about what you find in Fred's music from a logical or structural point of view, anything like that?

**Paul Steinbeck:** You can also pick up this book from Fred Anderson. I think we're working on a second edition now, so stay tuned for that. It will probably be available on the Velvet Lounge website eventually. It's a good resource for a lot of people—not trying to do the commercial plug thing.

One thing that occurred to me when I started taking that microscopic perspective with Fred's music, with Fred's performances, is something you don't always see in all forms of music or all styles of music—a combination of a

really intense and passionate and compelling surface, that's what's presented to you immediately when you hear. If you go to the Velvet Lounge or anywhere else and hear Fred play, you're almost always swept up in it, and you buy into it as a listener. I know that happens when you're performing on stage with Fred too. There's this power to it—that's kind of a tired word sometimes—but it's a compelling thing that speaks to you. At the same time, when you get in deep, there is so much logic, and so many beautiful ways the notes and the rhythms work together, and seem to say more. And I think that's a characteristic that's found, maybe not in all musics, maybe in some musics, but certainly in what we call great art forms, things that are enduring, something that stands up to multiple hearings, multiple viewings, multiple ways of investigating it.

I found that with Fred's music, and also when working with him on this book of his exercises that he's practiced from for forty-some years. The surface is there, it's accessible and understandable, but you can turn it into a kaleidoscope and look at it again and again. And that's what Fred tells me whenever I talk to him: "Hey, I was practicing this morning and in this exercise I found so much in here. I didn't even *know* it was all in there." And he had written this forty or fifty years ago. That illustrates patience and dedication and consistency, and what is yielded when you just dedicate yourself to something, and keep investigating, and keep digging. I think as a scholar of music, or any kind of artist or scholar, you can dig into what Fred's done and see for yourself, too.

**George Lewis:** Well, this is the astonishing thing, in a way, just from your standpoint. You're going to be a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Chicago for what, a year? Two years. It's sort of amazing to me. Your dissertation was on the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the structural aspects of their music, and I've been kind of amazed, frankly, at how you've managed to insert really quite radical and unusual ideas about the structure of improvisation into these academic spaces, and have really promulgated a new way of looking at improvisation that I think is quite influential.

That having been said, what you just said about Fred's music, I kind of experienced this personally because the concert we're going to do tomorrow consists of various ways of looking at Fred's music, through taking Fred's music and making arrangements of it in very unusual ways, usually his compositions. For example, yesterday the Great Black Music Ensemble practiced, and somehow Ed Wilkerson managed to make "Dark Day" into a tango. It was pretty stunning—from a tango to some sort of African motif. And my own piece, which I have here, Fred, you can see—I don't know if you recognize this. This is the Zita Carno moment where Zita presents John Coltrane with a transcription of his music and he says, "Oh, I could never play this." But the whole piece is basically taken from a transcription that Paul made of a particular solo of Fred's. It's like an eight-minute solo, and it starts out like [sings. . .].

**Fred Anderson:** "December the 4th."

**George Lewis:** Oh, you remember it—"December the 4th." He remembers the solo, see.

**Fred Anderson:** Paul transcribed it and you put it in your book. It's in the AACM book.

**George Lewis:** Basically, Paul sent me a transcription and what I did was, instead of making a composition based on a composition of yours, like a standard piece, I opted for orchestrating your entire solo from beginning to end, so that you hear the band. Basically, everybody has a piece of your solo. The problem is, if you assigned one person the entire solo, they'd never be able to play it. And even now, the thing is, we're playing it considerably more slowly than you did. Everybody has their little piece.

And then the thing that you find, just to complete the picture, is that when you're trying to work with this in this intense way, you're faced with the logic of your music, of your improvisations. And it's something you can't really fool around with. I thought, well, maybe I should take a passage and cut here and cut this part out, but you couldn't do it. If you cut it, it got ruined. And suddenly you think, now I see why that doesn't work. And now I see why what Fred was thinking about at that moment in the solo did work. And somehow there was this logic—I couldn't break in. All I could do was say, "OK, I can't break in, but I can give the flute these four notes, and give the saxophone these four notes, and give the singers these five notes of a solo that went [sings. . .]." It was something that even people like the great Ari Brown, everybody was kind of struggling to play. But that kind of logic was inescapable. Now what I wanted to ask you—and I know this is a difficult thing to answer—gets into your process. How does this logic get created while you're playing?

**Fred Anderson:** You know—let's just say, for instance—I work on these exercises a lot, and I hear a lot of things. And I just put them together. It's like a puzzle in my mind. And when I'm soloing, I've always got options—certain things that I can play. I don't have to play the same thing. I can always change it. If I just maybe change it by one thing, one note, one rhythm, change the rhythm, it sounds like I'm playing something different. But basically I'm

playing the same thing, with options. You're always thinking about not repeating the same thing, over and over. One thing I try to stay away from is repetition. And I've always figured, you've got twelve tones, you've got a lot of things you can use. You've got a lot of stuff you can use with those twelve tones—octaves, you can use a whole lot of things, fourths, you can use a whole lot of things, but you just have to put them together so you'll have continuity—so it comes out as an idea, the rhythm and the melody. And basically I'm always thinking about melody. That's my process of creating music—melody.

**George Lewis:** Well, if you want to look, there's another dissertation that's unpublished by Nanette De Jong in which what she did was—she sat down with you, and you guys listened together to a solo that you had made. And then at certain points, you would make comments on what you were thinking about right then, which was very informative. And this happens at a space with twenty years remove. You can actually listen to something—and I've had this experience myself—you can listen to a piece that you never really heard before. You played it, it got recorded, twenty years later you listen to it again for the first time. And that sound puts you back into that space. It's as if you had the whole scene encoded in your brain, and you can come back and get to that space again.

What I wanted to ask about is the idea of options, like you said at the very beginning. You have options, and this is something that comes out in improvisation particularly—not just in music, but improvisation as a general space in which we live our lives. And so when you talk about options, the message that gets sent through improvisation is that the person who's playing is not the only one who has the option. You have options too, and not just in listening to the music. You have options in other things once you leave the performance space. Maybe the idea is that you can start developing options, or as Max Roach was once quoted as saying, “this music makes us think about our situation,” and then once again start to develop options for other ways of living, other ways of thinking about the social conditions, or other things that get announced by improvisation—other kinds of spaces for establishing through what you said, just through playing.

**Paul Steinbeck:** What you just said reminded me of something Fred told me about ten years ago, when I first started talking to him and studying his music. He was explaining his theory of tonality and how the whole world of pitch works, and he said something about—with there being twelve tones, you're always only half a step from right or wrong. And I guess, in a trivial way sometimes, you say, “you almost hit that right note,” or “this note fit with the chord or didn't fit with the chord.” But with Fred, he quickly crosses over conceptually, in the space of one or two words, from the musical space to the life space, and the notion of ethics and what you should do and how you should live your life—how you can use these options and how you can make a different decision. This is very present for Fred in the Fred-sphere—not just when he's performing on stage, but when he's practicing too, when he's studying theory, when he's writing music, when he's just out there living. There's a continuity there that's pretty remarkable, and that I think animates a lot of these other discussions.

**Tatsu Aoki:** I think the “half step away” is his famous quote. I also heard that from him early on, about right or wrong, you're a half step away. There's something really linear about Fred's improvisations that is really special, and I think, maybe, Paul, you can agree with me as a bass player—it's a really phenomenal experience to hear someone's solo that is so linear. And it comes in this huge block, different from other horn players where it's coming in little tiny chunks. But with Fred there is something so connected about how he plays. I'm not a musical theorist, so I can't really describe it well, but I've always felt that connection of one sound to another, and that really creates the visual experience, to me.

**George Lewis:** Let me pick up on a new theme now. It was touched upon in your interview, about your role as an educator, did you consider yourself an educator. And Tsehaye in particular talked about the ways in which the openness to women artists was a part of her educational experience, and that of people like Rrata, who now became Christina Jones, or people like that. But in addition to that, there was all that introduction of people as professors, and all that. We can all sort of comment—maybe, Francis, I can ask you—about how some of the ideas about how do you approach this kind of education, perhaps with reference to some of the things that Fred has been doing educationally. How do you approach education in this way?

**Francis Wong:** Well, I think that the importance of the community in the creation of knowledge—sometimes in Chinatown, in San Francisco, we talk about in some ways our academies are not telling all of our story. And so the spaces that we have in the community—I work at the Chinese Historical Society Museum in Chinatown. It's not a fancy museum, but we've got a lot of boxes of stuff. Our greatest historian in Chinatown did not teach at the university. He was an engineer. But he had a passion for the knowledge of finding all of the historic sites where Chinese have been, and analyzing what villages that people came from, and the dialects and everything. So the whole idea of community knowledge, preserving the source of it, probably the integrity of our community depends on that. And how that knowledge is transmitted is just as important.

And so the way in which folks have described [Fred], and my own experience of Fred, it's not really about, like, "I'm the teacher, you're the student, I'm the mentor." It's not about position. I think there's a lot that resonates with a lot of our cultures. I know for me, another one of our traditions in Asia is Buddhist tradition, and also Taoism; Chinese Taoism, we have this idea of universal substance, that we're all made of the same thing. And so the whole idea that somehow knowledge provides position, status—to me, that doesn't exist in Fred's space. To me, that's how the integrity of the knowledge of our community is preserved and transmitted. And I just see that this happens in your presence.

**Douglas Ewart:** Well, I think that it's kind of interesting that out of the Association, a number of people have become educators. And I think that Fred is an educator in the finest sense of the word. And when we think about academics, we're talking about people that pursue scholarship—and Fred is a *scholar*. So I don't really differentiate. This is the true kind of university. You remember the University Without Walls? This is it. So to me, I'm not surprised that so many of us do bear the title "professors." Many of us are beholden, if you will, to Fred's mentorship and example of openness. Because if you don't have openness, you really can't investigate anything—and thorough investigation—you have to have that kind of unbridled approach to learning. That's how Fred's thing is. I don't remember him ever telling us—some people teach by scolding all the time, and scorning. We never experienced that with Fred.

And one of the things that I think about Fred is that stance that he used to take. I always wanted to ask him if that was this connection. I wrote a poem recently about his touching of the bell of his instrument to the floor. I always thought that it was like a wellspring. When he went down into that stance, we knew it was going to be thirty minutes before he came back up. And this would be a *serious engagement* during that time.

But one of the points that I really wanted to emphasize is, you know, not trying to shy away from being scholars, because we come up under scholars, and that scholarship is not in a room. I remember my early days in school, we went out under a tree to study. So we have this notion that it's a room, and you got to have a bunch of books and so on. You can have that and don't have any learning. All you have to do is go to Africa or one of those places where people barely have anything, and see how brilliant the students are. And you go to places that have all kinds of trappings—and ain't nothing shaking.

**Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert:** I think knowledge is such a wide circle, and I so resonate with what you said, because that is how I learned from Fred—by example. Again, I had no direction, so I was left to my own devices, so to speak. I had to find my own artistic vision. And once I found that vision, I had to find my commitment to my artistic vision. Not that you stay there and you're stagnant with it, but you have the permission to just open up so much stuff. It's just like a Pandora's box.

Another thing that I've learned from Fred and a lot of my esteemed colleagues—including my close friend to the right, Douglas Ewart—is discipline. I so believe that discipline is freedom. To listen to these guys just rehearse all day long—I came through this with my mother playing piano all the time—it just brings home that this stuff is not magic. Yeah, it's innate, it's there, but if you want to really further what you're doing, you must have the discipline to sit down—or stand up, whatever—and do your craft. This is what I teach my students, whether I'm teaching a writing class at Cook County Jail or I'm in a university classroom. You have to have your discipline, you have to have your artistic vision, and you have to have roots and wings—where you're rooted, and you do have that permission to fly and to go. But what are you expressing? Be learned about that.

And like Douglas was saying, that knowledge doesn't always come out of a book, although we don't eschew books. Again, I think it's a very wide circle. So much comes into that circle of knowledge, whether it's experiential or whatever. It's wide enough for all of us to be in. And I think our students are the richer for it. We are not the sage on the stage. We don't have all of those answers. I think that's what Fred taught me—if I wanted to find those answers, they were in many different places. There wasn't just one right answer, there wasn't one right movement to his sound.

**Tatsu Aoki:** I think that one of the life lessons—how to build the community, and to build arts and culture—this is a direct quote from Fred. He would say, "You can only contribute, and your reward is the fact that you can contribute." It really reflects his contribution to the community. Francis and I really use this phrase very often to some of our younger people in the community. It's a beautiful sentence: "*You can only contribute.*"

**George Lewis:** Fred—I don't know if you remember this, that you actually kind of did give people classes, you know, in your house. People know this—Chico Freeman, Iqua Colson, Adegoke Colson reported this, and I reported their conversations in my book. I certainly remember sitting there with you, and your desperate attempts to get me to understand Charlie Parker, which went well beyond what could be publicly discussed. That says that you were

actually functioning, even in a more traditional sense, I think, as an educator—someone who was really devoted, would go the last mile to get people to try to understand things.

But before we take a few questions from people, I want to ask a little bit about Fred as a composer. You said earlier, [during] your duo with Paul, that your compositions came out of your exercises. And one of the things that I think people do forget about AACM practice is that it remains kind of composition-centered to this day. For all the improvising that takes place, it's sort of not based so much on the models of free improvisation that developed, say, in Europe in the 1960s around the same time as the AACM, but was more of a composition-improvisation hybrid, if you will, in some sense, based on we're composers and we're thinking about composition. Maybe I could ask you about the relationship between your compositions, your preparation through developing exercises, and your improvisation.

**Fred Anderson:** Well, say for instance, if I'm practicing and I hear a little thing that sounds good to me, I just try to play it until I can feel it coming together. If it starts coming together, I think about the beginning of it, I think about it in four-bar phrases. If I can get four bars out of it, I can get another four, you know. So that's how I look at it. And whatever really sounds good to me, that's what I use. But it takes a while for me to really say, "I think this will work." And it gets to the point where I can just do it off the top of my head. I can be on stage, playing, and all of a sudden something will come to me—in my subconscious—something I would never really think about. Not in my conscious mind, in my subconscious mind. So the more you practice and get things in your conscious mind, you can put it in your subconscious mind and it will come out, because you've done played it. In one way or another, you've done heard this sound before. And then you start hearing it as you go along, and you start putting things together. It's like a puzzle, it's just like life.

My best thoughts are early in the morning when I first wake up. Those are my best thoughts about anything—paying a bill, whatever. I think about it in the morning when I wake up. Early in the morning, those are my best thoughts about anything, about music. I may go to sleep listening to music, and wake up the next morning and some things will come to me. So I never know what's happening. I just have to go with life and with the flow.

**George Lewis:** The best thoughts come to you in the morning, that's interesting. My four-year-old son asked me the other day, "How come they don't have concerts in the morning?" It was difficult to explain, and I'm not sure the answer was very satisfactory. But are there questions from anyone? You could shout them out, if people have comments or questions for the panel or for Fred.

**[Question from the audience, as paraphrased by George Lewis]:** "Your thoughts about teaching young composers about composition, and inspiring them to write?"

**Fred Anderson:** Well, anybody can compose music. All you've got to do is play whatever you feel and what you hear. That's the way I look at it. I never studied composition, with any kind of a professor or anything. This is the way I heard the music. The compositions are the way I heard it. So I think if a kid can write a song at four years old—I've heard cats say, "I wrote my first song when I was four." That's the way he heard it. If there's a formula for composition, somebody can teach it, but how can a kid have a formula at four years old and write a song?

**[Question from the audience, as paraphrased by George Lewis]:** "This is about teaching people how to improvise—teaching someone how to improvise."

**Fred Anderson:** Well, first you've got to do the basic things—learn the scales, and learn the chords, and learn the connections, and all of the things that go with it. And then you can sort of put it together. Improvisation is something that you have to work on. You've got to find out what works, and what you can do. You can almost do anything if you know how to do it.

Like I said, it's twelve tones. You've got your upper neighbor, lower neighbor. Coming down the chromatic scale, you've got your upper neighbor going to the principal tone. Going up, you've got the lower neighbor going to the principal tone. So you have to look at all of that. And as far as the rhythm, there's a whole bunch of things. It's like life—you don't learn everything at one time, it takes a while. Sometimes it takes you years to learn about just basic things, you know. So you got to keep working on it and putting it together. And improvisation, there's an art to it, but you've got to know exactly what's happening at that particular time and that particular moment, and have respect for the scales and chords.

I think Lester Young said something that his father told him when he was copying off the records and everything, you know. And he told him, "Look, you go somewhere and learn some scales." He said that made him feel bad, but that's

what he did: he went someplace and he learned some scales. That's how he got to be Lester Young—because his father told him. Those are the ingredients that you have to have—and play the instrument, you know what I mean, and have the instrument at your command. And there's a lot of little things. We could sit here all night and I can tell you a whole lot of things. That's the way life is. But that don't mean you're going to get it overnight. It takes time to understand a lot of things—about anything.

**George Lewis:** Do we have three minutes to digress on that topic? I tell you what—knowing the questioner as I do, I'd like to comment on some of the themes that are brought out in this question. There are several points in common about this idea of how to teach improvisation. I kind of feel in some way it's sort of what you described, as an approach based on base materials, which is something I've heard Muhal discuss as well. You develop things from a base of strong materials. What we start to find in some ways is that people start to think, "Well, what are those materials?" [Note: A few words were lost due to a videotape change.] And funny sounds and noise may be a kind of material as well. So I'm just wondering—individually—Tsehaye, in your work how do you utilize improvisation?

**Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert:** Well, the fun thing about it is that you always have your bag of tricks. And what I've learned is that I figure it out when I'm working with that particular audience. Sometimes I'll play some experimental music and give people one minute to write as much as [they] can, which allows them not to think so much about what they're writing. And of course, there's so many different modes of improvisation in the theatre. I can't even get into that—and movement as well. Sometimes I think there could be some safety in having some type of parameter.

And then, as Fred was saying, the more your students get used to *doing* that, they're able to—in writing, for example—they're able to find their own voice. First, they're taking baby steps, and then they can stand up, and then they're able to just walk up to a microphone and freestyle. Sometimes there is guidance, but more in terms of providing that space to create. And I find that my biggest job is to step out of the way, let you have that space—let them fall down, if you will, and figure out how to get back up. And again, that's something I learned listening to you all, and just being in that environment where there is nothing wasted. Provide the space and the encouragement, and just step out of the way and let them go on in. Let them go in.

**Francis Wong:** I guess I also look at in terms of it's an offering, and deciding what to offer. And then being connected to yourself—and by yourself, meaning knowledge, whether it's a sound or syntax, since the offering is a communication. What do you know about communication? And then really engaging in improvisation in terms of understanding how it comes about in your life, so that we can practice it all the time. That's something I read about in interviews with musicians. Basically, whether they're on stage or with their instrument, they're always practicing. But practicing is not what you think about as practice—at least when I was growing up: "I have thirty minutes to practice"—but a *practice* of being in touch, being connected, developing your knowledge, and then being prepared to offer it in the moment.

**Douglas Ewart:** I think about Fred mentioning scales, the importance of learning the structural elements of any craft. If you're going to write, you've got to learn words, you've got to learn sentences, you've got to learn phrases, you've got to learn paragraphs. And I think whether you're doing tailoring, whether you're doing computer[s], there's scales in it. In other words, you have to understand programming to some degree, you have to understand how the machine operates. You have to study, in other words. Fred would always say, "*learn your ax.*" And—he doesn't mention it, because he's got such humility about things—but we'd be playing, and he'd play a phrase. You might say something, and he wouldn't say anything in words, but he'd give this whole dissertation with that illustration from his instrument.

And when we would go to Fred's, he was always practicing. And he would take a phrase and play it over and over, and he'd just gradually change it—insert a rhythm here, or change one note. One of the elements of composition that we learn is restriction, sometimes. They give you six notes, and they tell you [that you] can't skip in one direction, or you can't go smooth. You need to learn all of these things in order to have "Favorite Things."

**Tatsu Aoki:** I think it's also a decision based on process. If you can make sure, strong decisions for yourself, I think you can also improvise, on top of the fact that you also have to have a basic understanding. I remember my first jazz-improvising teacher was a wonderful drummer named Afifi Phillard. He would actually scream at me from the drums, "Tatsu! Play the bass!" And I never understood what he meant for a long time, but that was about decision-making. I wasn't really making a decision so that he could hear my improvisation as a life story.

**Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert:** I'd like to add one more thing. You just made me think about that when I'm teaching writing, and I have that open space for improvisation, I try to bring in very many other genres of art. When I taught in this building, I would send the students into this room to watch a dance performance, I would send them into the

galleries to look at paintings. Again, this is part of this movement of experimental art, period. I would just have to say there is so much genre-bending and free-flowing between two, three, four, whatever, that really has helped not only myself as an artist, but helped my students to open their minds a little more.

**Paul Steinbeck:** The educational atmosphere that Fred creates draws upon his sense of personal integrity and discipline and mission, and that in turn draws people who share those same values and goals. And that may be one reason why Fred has produced educators, and why he's produced people who use their self-confidence and a sense of purpose to inspire others to move in those same spaces.

**Douglas Ewart:** I just want to interject one last thing, on my account anyway. Fred's house was a refuge for many people, besides the beautiful music that we enjoyed there. There were great conversations. I remember when some of the people that were attending Northwestern felt isolation and were really being assailed at school in many respects, by racism and segregation. And they were able to go to Fred and find a supporting solace. So his mentorship and his scholarship and his fathering was really multi-dimensional. And I think we can't underestimate that aspect when we talk about Fred.

**George Lewis:** Before we take one or two more questions, I just want to say one more thing about this topic. Part of the autodidactic approach, which I think Fred's career is a very pure articulation of, is that education is not just one-way—teacher-to-student transmission, or student-to-teacher—but, in fact, at every moment education is available, if you choose to decide that this is an educational moment. And getting to the business that Tsehaye mentioned about genres, and introducing many different genres to learn from, my feeling has always been that I can learn as much from listening to someone singing in the shower as I can learn from some super-musician or so-called super-musician. So the curious thing about that is listening to the super-musicians kind of teaches you that in the end, at every moment there's that possibility that the process of learning is part of improvisation. And teaching of improvisation also involves improvisation, and musical improvisation itself is a form of teaching, if not preaching—hopefully not that, but certainly teaching.

Are there more questions? Well, this is an extraordinary thing. This has turned into an improvised *Festschrift*, a public *Festschrift* for Fred Anderson. I'd like to thank the Chicago Cultural Center, the Jazz Institute of Chicago, Lauren Deutsch, Michael Orlove, all of our panelists, and most of all Fred Anderson, for making this possible and for sharing his time and ideas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.jazzinchicago.org/presents/made-chicago/celebrating-jazz-hero-fred-andersons-80th-birthday-great-black-music-ensemble>>.

<sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.velvetlounge.net>>.