

“Patience, Sincerity, and Consistency”: Fred Anderson’s Musical and Social Practices

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The August 19, 2009 symposium held in honor of Chicago tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson, and the eightieth-birthday concert that took place the following evening, provided tangible representations of the acclaim and appreciation received by Anderson in his last years.¹ Though Anderson was best known for his work as a performer, bandleader, and “gray eminence” on the international jazz and improvised-music scene (Ratliff), he was equally successful in the social realm, as an educator, a community builder, and—critically—the steward of the Velvet Lounge nightclub, which he owned and operated from 1982 to 2010 (Lewis, *A Power* 513).² In this article, I examine Anderson’s musical and social practices, demonstrating how he constructed inclusive, supportive spaces for multiple personal expression via musical sound and social interaction. I also consider the relationships between Anderson’s efforts and the goals of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the African American artists’ collective that Anderson was affiliated with for more than four decades. The “data set” for this investigation includes the proceedings of the above-mentioned symposium, my own interviews with Anderson, and analyses of his compositions, performances, and music-theoretical discoveries.

Learning

Fred Anderson’s early years as a musician were spent in intense preparation. Born on March 22, 1929, he began playing saxophone in his teens, but his first public performances did not take place until the 1960s (Cromwell 181). Anderson marveled at the music of Charlie Parker, and he listened closely to the top tenor saxophonists of the day: Chu Berry, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Chicagoans like Gene Ammons. As his interest in the saxophone grew, Anderson decided to depart from the emulative model of musical learning chosen by his peers in Evanston, Illinois, the Chicago suburb where he lived during his adolescent years after moving from Monroe, Louisiana:

At that particular time, most of the guys were playing the solos just like they heard on the records. Gene Ammons, anybody they liked, they were playing their solos, and that was the hip thing. But [. . .] it didn’t sound right to me because I didn’t have the tools to do it. So I started studying, trying to play the horn and get familiar with the saxophone, and I think that was the way to really hear what those guys were doing, instead of [. . .] just listening to what a cat’s playing—because that’s personal stuff. But how did he get to that? He got it by working hard, practicing, and being very persistent with what he’s doing. (Anderson, 2000 interview)

Inspired by the dedication and audible individuality of his musical heroes, Anderson took responsibility for assembling his own “tools.” In Evanston, he found a saxophone teacher, Martin Bough, whose lessons involved heavy doses of music theory (Anderson, 2009 interview). Even after Anderson stopped studying with Bough, he continued to teach himself tenor saxophone and music theory, pursuing what George Lewis called the “autodidact’s path,” a practice that Anderson would share with many of his future colleagues in the AACM (Lewis, *A Power* 26).

In the 1950s, Anderson enrolled in formal music-theory classes at the Roy Knapp conservatory in Chicago’s downtown Loop district. The instructor, Al Poskonka, taught Anderson the fundamentals of diatonic theory—intervals, major and minor scales, triads and seventh chords, the circle of fifths—as well as harmonic patterns and arranging techniques associated with jazz. Poskonka also helped Anderson understand the characteristic structures of Charlie Parker’s music, specifically Parker’s use of chromatic passing tones and neighbor tones, placed on and off the beat (Anderson, 2009 interview). For an illustration of how Anderson learned to analyze Parker’s approaches to melody and rhythm, see Examples 1 and 2: reproductions of Anderson’s hand-written lead sheets for “Cool Blues” and “Blues for Alice” (Anderson, manuscript collection). The opening phrases of both compositions are based on descending scales, and “Blues for Alice” can be heard as a chromatic realization of the underlying stepwise contour that appears in “Cool Blues” as a fluid, diatonic Kansas City riff.

Example 1 | “Cool Blues,” mm. 1-4



Fred Anderson: That's the whole point, because if you just learn the exercises and play them, that's all you're going to play! That's like playing scales, if you just learn how to go up and down a scale, that's all you're going to do. (Anderson, 2002 interview)

Example 3 | Fred Anderson exercise³



Anderson's exercise-centered practice routine made him especially attuned to the sonic relationships between different pitch intervals, and to the ways he could subtly reshape the emotional valence of a phrase by substituting one note for another. When striking improvisatory ideas emerged during a practice session, Anderson would develop them until they seemed to reproduce in him a particular emotion or sentiment. Then he would fashion these melodies into a formal composition intended to evoke a poignant experience or memorable personality (Anderson, 2009 interview). This compositional strategy is clearly evident in "Bernice," which Anderson wrote for his wife (see Example 4).

Example 4 | "Bernice"⁴



The theme is built from a pair of three-note motives, which I will call X and Y. X first appears in m. 1, as a descending whole step followed by a descending major third (A, G, Eb); Y retains the major-third interval, but precedes it with a descending half step, as in m. 2 (B, A#, F#). Despite X and Y's similarities, Y sounds more stable, intervallically speaking, and it recurs several times before the second instance of X, notably in a sequential passage spanning mm. 5-7. The Y sequence restarts in m. 15, but in the following bar A moves to G, not G#, and the open-ended X motive returns. What results is a transition-like ending that demands continuation: the musical equivalent, perhaps, of answering a question with another question. For Anderson, the tonal momentum and motivic density of "Bernice" told the story of an extroverted, candid, and irrepressible woman (Anderson, 2010 interview).

Bandleading

Anderson had been workshoping Charlie Parker pieces with Evanston trumpeter Billy Brimfield since the late 1950s (Lewis, *A Power* 26-27). Once he started composing, bassist Bill Fletcher and drummer Vernon Thomas joined the group, forming a quartet with a book consisting of bebop standards and Anderson's originals (Friedman and Birnbaum 21). The piano-less instrumentation of this band reflected the influence of Ornette Coleman, and in certain respects Anderson's early-1960s compositions were also Coleman-esque. During this period, Anderson was studying a book of transcribed arrangements from Coleman's first two Atlantic albums, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* and *Change of the Century* (Schuller). Many of these pieces have multi-part themes constructed from phrases that contrast in tempo, melodic content, and rhythmic profile—an approach adopted by Anderson in “The Bull,” “Little Fox Run,” “Planet E,” and other contemporaneous works. However, Coleman's themes often established clear formal outlines for the improvisations that followed (Cogswell 115), whereas Anderson's originals were significantly less determinative (Solothurnmann 41). In the Anderson group's performances, notated melodies were subject to extensive re-interpretation, and functioned as points of emotional departure, not immutable structural blueprints. Similarly, the musical style developed by the quartet was viewed as contingent, collaborative, and emergent from practice, rather than as the mere sum of idiomatic references embedded in their composed themes: “I used to write these lines,” Anderson remembered, “and after the line they didn't know what to play. I said ‘We'll just play!’ This is where the *outsideness* came in” (Anderson, 1990 interview). Anderson was implementing a socially innovative model of musical leadership in which the composer renounced the self-interested position of “central figure” or *de facto* “scorer of improvisations,” as Leo Smith puts it (116). Instead, Anderson worked to create musical-social spaces that prioritized spontaneity and multiple personal expression over the precise reproduction of his compositional texts. Accordingly, Anderson's 1960s quartet could be conceptualized as a “transcendent collective enterprise,” philosopher Stanley Benn's descriptor for a social group devoted to a “valued endeavor or worthwhile activity which must be pursued collectively,” and where the “*telos* of the association is [. . .] the activity itself [. . .] rather than the [interests] of the members of the enterprise” (218).

The preeminence Anderson attached to original music and multiple personal expression placed him in natural alignment with the circle of artists who would go on to form the AACM. In 1963 or so, Anderson began participating in the weekly jam sessions held on the West Side of Chicago at Fifth Jack's, where he would perform with alto saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell (Cromwell 182; Radano 82).⁵ Another Fifth Jack's regular was pianist Richard Abrams, who discussed with Anderson their shared vision of “a space to play our own music” (Anderson, Remarks). Anderson also encountered alto saxophonist Joseph Jarman around this time. Like Mitchell, Jarman played in the reed section of Abrams's Experimental Band, the rehearsal ensemble that was an important precursor of the AACM. Jarman regarded Anderson as an “inspirational” figure, and took to riding the train all the way from the South Side to Anderson's residence in Evanston “just to play with him and Billy [Brimfield].” In 1965, when the AACM was founded—with Anderson, Brimfield, and Jarman as charter members—the Anderson group remained a collective enterprise, with a repertoire that had expanded to include pieces by Brimfield and Jarman. Although Anderson's responsibilities in Evanston prevented him from attending many meetings of the Association, Jarman arranged for their quintet to perform at the inaugural AACM concert on August 16, 1965 (Lewis, *A Power* 115-116).⁶ For Anderson, being featured at this concert was akin to a “dream,” albeit one that was prompted by practical considerations: at the time, his group was one of the few active AACM ensembles with enough original compositions to fill an entire concert program (Anderson, Remarks).

By the mid-1970s, Anderson had surrounded himself with a new set of musicians and artists—South Side AACM members like reedist Douglas Ewart and trombonist George Lewis; Northwestern University students like pianist Soji Adebayo, vocalist Iqua Colson, and dancer Tsehayé Geralyn Hébert; Evanstonians like bassist Felix Blackmon and drummer Hamid (then Hank) Drake; and many others (Hébert; Lewis, *A Power* 287-296, 320-321; Lewis, “Teaching” 88). These performers were a full generation younger than Anderson and comparatively inexperienced, yet he granted them considerable creative agency as members of his band, encouraging his charges to “express themselves like they want to express themselves” through composition and improvisatory performance (Anderson, Remarks). This stance was consonant with the leadership model that Anderson employed in the 1960s, but in the intergenerational context of his 1970s group, notions of collaboration and multiple personal expression took on additional social meaning. For Douglas Ewart, the opportunity to “present our compositions right along with a master like Fred Anderson [. . .] was both humbling and strengthening for us as young performers.” George Lewis was similarly humbled and strengthened by the availability of unlimited solo space in Anderson's music:

Fred Anderson's mid-1970s ensemble usually began a piece by negotiating a fearsomely difficult notated theme, such as Anderson's “Within.” Shortly thereafter, the leader would produce an improvised solo of ferocious intensity and brilliance of invention. In particular, Anderson's playing possesses a powerfully

capacity as bandleader, signaling Taylor and me to take solos on every piece but one, and asking each of us to initiate some of the open improvisations. Midway through the concert, Anderson decided to play one of his compositions, a gesture that I retrospectively interpreted as a kindness to me. The piece he chose, “December 4th,” was something I had spent a great deal of time with a few years earlier, transcribing and analyzing Anderson’s recorded solo, and eventually publishing my transcription (along with his exercises) in the method book that he and I co-wrote (Anderson and Steinbeck).⁸ The concert ended with another open improvisation in which we gradually converted certain elements of the “December 4th” melody into a churning Afro-Latin groove, with cowbell ostinatos and interlocking pentatonic scales. In between was thirteen minutes of intricate group interplay—something that Anderson would have described as “a structure where people listen to each other”:

We’re automatically creating some kind of structure, because we’re conscious of what’s happening at that particular moment. Most musicians that I play with, they’re able to do that. It’s not even spoken before, it’s just a way we communicate [. . .] I don’t really tell a guy what to do because he can *hear*. [. . .] I think we just have a feeling for each other, for the music, and for each other as a person—as somebody who’s interested in trying to make music together and do something positive. (Anderson, 2000 interview)

Teaching

Anderson’s work as an educator was inseparable from his performing career. “If the guys wanted to learn from me,” he explained, “they had to come and play” (qtd. in Solothurnmann 41). He provided a thorough musical education to many of his bandmates, from early collaborators such as Billy Brimfield and Joseph Jarman to contemporary Chicago artists young enough to be his grandchildren. Anderson’s educational efforts sometimes involved musicianship and musical technique, oftentimes entailed close study of audio recordings (especially jazz albums both old and new), and at all times included discourses on the life and music of Charlie Parker. George Lewis, like nearly everyone in Anderson’s orbit, remembered “sitting there with you [Anderson], and your desperate attempts to get me to understand Charlie Parker, which went well beyond what could be publicly discussed” (Lewis, Remarks). Anderson’s credo of “patience, sincerity, and consistency” was another vital element of his pedagogy, particularly his interactions with younger artists, to whom time-based concepts might seem abstract or elusive (Anderson, Remarks). However, as Douglas Ewart observed, Anderson generally refrained from rigid prescription, preferring to present an “example of openness” and an “unbridled approach to learning.” In keeping with his openness, Anderson would have considered himself a co-learner, rather than a “regular kind of educator”: “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” (Anderson, Remarks). This inventive co-learning pedagogy emanated from the social structure of Anderson’s ensembles. For Anderson and his bandmates, teaching and learning were collective, reciprocal activities; no one individual was permanently positioned as the central figure, fact-dispenser, or “sage on the stage,” to quote Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert. Instead, the members of Anderson’s intergenerational circle functioned as equal educational partners, benefiting from others’ knowledge and in turn contributing their own discoveries. This dialogical process was further enriched by the creative and developmental autonomy afforded each performer in the musical domain, which yielded multiple personal-experience-based insights that could be funneled back into the group via additional episodes of co-teaching and co-learning.

Anderson’s educational philosophy can be contextualized with an analogy to his musical practice. For decades, the exercises Anderson devised were indispensable to his daily saxophone routine. He might spend an hour or more on a single exercise, at first playing it as notated, and then progressively varying it to generate different intervals, alternative tonal paths, and distinct shades of musical meaning (Anderson, 2010 interview). However, Anderson rarely quoted or otherwise replicated passages from his exercises while improvising, as analytical listening to his performances and recordings reveals. In a sense, the exercises served as raw material for systematic re-composition, which ultimately crystallized into a methodology for the real-time generation of improvised melodies—rather like how a scholar unpacks a series of texts through hermeneutics and critical reading, in preparation for the spontaneous, expansive intellectual exchange of a high-level seminar. As Anderson understood, both theoretical training and individual creativity are prerequisites for the production of new ideas, whether in academic inquiry or in musical improvisation:

You can do so many things with these exercises, so I don’t want to say that if you do these exercises you’re going to play *this* and *this*. It’s an individual thing, and everybody has to create his own way. But I think these exercises will help you broaden your mind about playing and creating music. (Anderson, 2002 interview)

Building a community

Though Anderson's work as a musician, bandleader, and educator touched many lives, his most significant achievement was the community he built around his performance spaces: the Birdhouse (which he operated briefly in the 1970s) and the Velvet Lounge. Anderson had contemplated establishing "a space for the musicians to play" as early as the 1960s, when he met Muhal Richard Abrams at Fifth Jack's (Anderson, Remarks). This goal, slightly reframed, would become the first of nine organizational purposes that appeared in the 1965 AACM charter: "To cultivate young musicians and to create music of a high artistic level for the general public through the presentation of programs designed to magnify the importance of creative music" (Lewis, *A Power* 116). The AACM chose to realize this goal by producing concerts at venues owned by third parties, perhaps because of the Association's "extreme undercapitalization" at the time of its founding (Lewis, *A Power* 105). In the 1970s, the AACM launched a building fund designated for the purchase of a property suitable for staging concert events (Lewis, *A Power* 393). Anderson was in favor of this initiative, and contributed financially to it, but when an opportunity to manage an independent performance space "fell in [his] lap," he decided to act (Anderson, 2009 interview).

In the spring of 1977, shortly after Anderson returned from his first European tour, he found a storefront on the North Side of Chicago that was available for sub-lease at half price. The storefront was located at 4512 North Lincoln Avenue in the Lincoln Square neighborhood, just up the street from Delmark Records principal Bob Koester's Jazz Record Mart. Coincidentally, the landlord who rented to Koester also happened to own 4512 Lincoln (Anderson, 2009 interview). This seemed promising to Anderson, and in May 1977 he and his business partner—artist representative Sharon Friedman—opened the storefront performance space that they had named the Birdhouse, as in Charlie "Bird" Parker (Friedman and Birnbaum 20). Unfortunately, the Birdhouse venture lasted little more than a year. Anderson's mostly German American neighbors generated an impressive stream of noise complaints, and the Birdhouse was endlessly subjected to the kinds of official botheration customarily directed at politically-disfavored businesses by the Chicago civic authorities: intimidating visits by beat cops, byzantine licensing schemes, and extortionary ordered closings (Anderson, 2009 interview).

The following year, Anderson agreed to manage a Near South Side bar at the behest of Ford "Tip" Manyweathers, the proprietor and a friend of Anderson's who was undergoing an extended hospitalization (Jackson 50). Anderson took over as sole owner when his friend passed away, and in 1982 the tavern at 2128 1/2 South Indiana Avenue became the Velvet Lounge (Anderson, 2009 interview). Early on the Velvet Lounge was "losing a lot of customers," a circumstance that led Anderson to convert his blue-collar bar into a performance space. The first musical events held at the Velvet Lounge were "jam sessions" loosely modeled on the after-hours gatherings that took place at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem some forty years earlier (Anderson, Remarks). However, the highly competitive environment that had prevailed at Minton's was a relative non-factor at the "Velvet jams." Under Anderson's supervision, participating musicians were encouraged to develop performance methodologies that were "contributive, not competitive," in the words of Anderson's West Coast counterpart Horace Tapscott (201). Additionally, when Anderson sat in, or when he merely observed the onstage proceedings from his post at the bar, the presence of "one of the pioneers of...Great Black Music" endorsed sonic experimentalisms that would have been out of place at any other Chicago jam session. Essentially, the Velvet jams critiqued—and simultaneously posited a viable alternative to—the musical structures and social norms "imposed by the culture of mainstream jazz" (Lewis, "Teaching" 89). In conjunction with this manifold critique, the musical and social practices that had characterized Anderson's bands since the 1960s were transmitted, in whole or in part, to a broader network of performers and listeners, and the Velvet Lounge community began to take shape, as a physical and social space "[where] musicians of all stripes can [. . .] have open expression" (Ewart).

In the 1990s, the Velvet Lounge's music policy changed from biweekly jam sessions to performances by featured artists several evenings per week. As any regular at the club could perceive, Anderson's stated mission of providing a "space for the musicians" and "preserv[ing] this great tradition" was unchanged—but his conceptualization of this musical tradition, and of the musician-centered community required to sustain and advance it, grew increasingly diverse (Anderson, Remarks). In turn, the "open-mindedness" evident in Anderson's stewardship of the Velvet Lounge "changed our communities and music scenes in Chicago," according to Tatsu Aoki (Aoki, Remarks). As Aoki's strategic use of the plural indicates, the Velvet Lounge was a point of intersection for several ethnically-defined musical communities, notably the AACM and a core of Asian American performers that Aoki eventually organized into Asian Improv aRts Midwest (AIRMW). Like the double- and triple-decker streets of downtown Chicago, the AACM-AIRMW intersection operated on multiple levels—symbolically, vis-à-vis the Velvet Lounge's geographic position east of Chinatown and north of the old Bronzeville neighborhood; directly, when intercultural ensembles like the Miyumi Project made music on the Velvet stage; and historically, when these intercultural performances echoed earlier Afro-Asian collaborations such as pianist Glenn Horiuchi's band with AACM bassist M'Chaka Uba (Dessen 5)—renewing the AACM-derived "creative music" aesthetic that had inspired the Asian Improv community during its nascence on the West Coast (Wong 177). Of course, the AACM-AIRMW nexus was not the only instance of musical and social

inclusivity on display at the Velvet Lounge. During any given week circa 1999, the performers Anderson brought to his nightclub might include Ken Vandermark and a group of Swedish improvisers, Malachi Thompson's Freebop band, and—during the lively Sunday-night jam session—an impromptu ensemble comprised of Ernest Dawkins's South Side protégés and liberal-arts majors from the University of Chicago. Anderson's booking policies seemingly flowed from a sense of shared social values and his desire to support younger artists, not from performers' proven allegiance to established musical paradigms. In music-stylistic terms, and in respect to social formations like race and class, the pluralistic Velvet Lounge community became a locus of inclusion in a notoriously segregated city.⁹

In 2006, the building that housed the Velvet Lounge for twenty-four years was facing demolition, like any number of older structures on the Near South Side. Anderson and the Velvet community raised approximately \$120,000 to finance a move to a new storefront space at 67 East Cermak Road, just two blocks from the original location. When one steps into the glass-enclosed entryway of the "new Velvet," the first thing one sees is an inscription commemorating those who made the move to 67 East Cermak possible: "friends, fans, and Fred." The inscription captures how the members of the Velvet community had come to see themselves: as participants in a transcendent collective enterprise that, by acting decisively to "save the Velvet," could repay Anderson for the "patience, sincerity, and consistency" he had exhibited since opening the Lounge in 1982. This perception, and the collaborative action that ensued, also illustrate the considerable social capital (if not massive material profits) that individuals can accrue while hard at work building and maintaining a community. For Anderson, though, the work was its own reward: "You can only contribute," he often told Tatsu Aoki, "and your reward is the fact that you can contribute" (Aoki).

Conclusion

Fred Anderson remained committed to his interrelated musical and social practices until his death on June 24, 2010. As a performer, bandleader, and cultural curator, he strove to "preserve this great tradition" of creative music by developing new ideas and by helping other artists do the same (Anderson, Remarks). Many of these artists now consider themselves responsible for carrying on Anderson's work, in accordance with his colloquial counterfactual: "if you don't try to preserve your tradition there's nobody gonna preserve it for you!" (qtd. in Solothurnmann 43). The Velvet Lounge community also continues to function as a supportive space for personal expression and social interaction, drawing on Anderson's example (to be sure) while fostering new practices, and alternative practices yet to be imagined. It is because of this multiplicitous, forward-looking orientation that Anderson viewed the Velvet community as his "legacy":

All of the people that came through the Velvet Lounge, they have to keep it going. [. . .] 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. (Anderson, Remarks)

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Notes

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

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

³ Example 3 is excerpted from Anderson and Steinbeck (1, mm. 1-2). The complete exercise, as notated by Anderson, moves through all twelve keys along the ascending circle of fifths: <Dm7, G7, Am7, D7, [. . .], Gm7, C7>.

⁴ Example 4 is based on the concert-key "Bernice" lead sheet from Anderson and Steinbeck (59).

⁵ “Sometimes Roscoe and Fred Anderson would [. . .] break up the session,” Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre remembered: “Everybody would be standing around, talking about, what the hell are those guys doing? Fred Anderson would be, *Wahhggh!!* Roscoe would get up there and join him—*Ahhgggh!!*” (qtd. in Lewis, *A Power* 140).

⁶ In addition to Anderson, Brimfield, and Jarman, this quintet comprised Charles Clark, a bass prodigy from the South Side, and drummer Arthur Reed, a native Louisianan and former student of Ed Blackwell (Anderson, 2007 interview).

⁷ Example 5 is a concert-key transcription from Anderson (Audio recording).

⁸ This transcription resurfaced at the “Celebrating a Jazz Hero” tribute concert on August 20, 2009, when the AACM Great Black Music Ensemble performed a big-band interpretation of Anderson’s “December 4th” solo, as orchestrated by George Lewis. The version of “December 4th” that served as the basis for my transcription can be heard on the double CD *Volume Two*.

⁹ See Scruggs for a detailed analysis of “ethnically charged social space” in another contemporaneous South Side jazz lounge (180).

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