BOOKFORUM

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Free to Be Me and You and Me and You and You

Exploring the outer fringes of music

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SOUND EXPERIMENTS: THE MUSIC OF THE AACM BY PAUL STEINBECK. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 304 PAGES. $33.

FREE MUSIC PRODUCTION/FMP: THE LIVING MUSIC BY MARKUS MÜLLER HOFHEIM: WOLKE VERLAG. 400 PAGES. $40.

THE CRICKET: BLACK MUSIC IN EVOLUTION, 1968–69 EDITED BY AMIRI BARAKA, A. B. SPELLMAN, AND LARRY NEAL. BROOKLYN, NY: BLANK FORMS EDITIONS. 184 PAGES. $35.

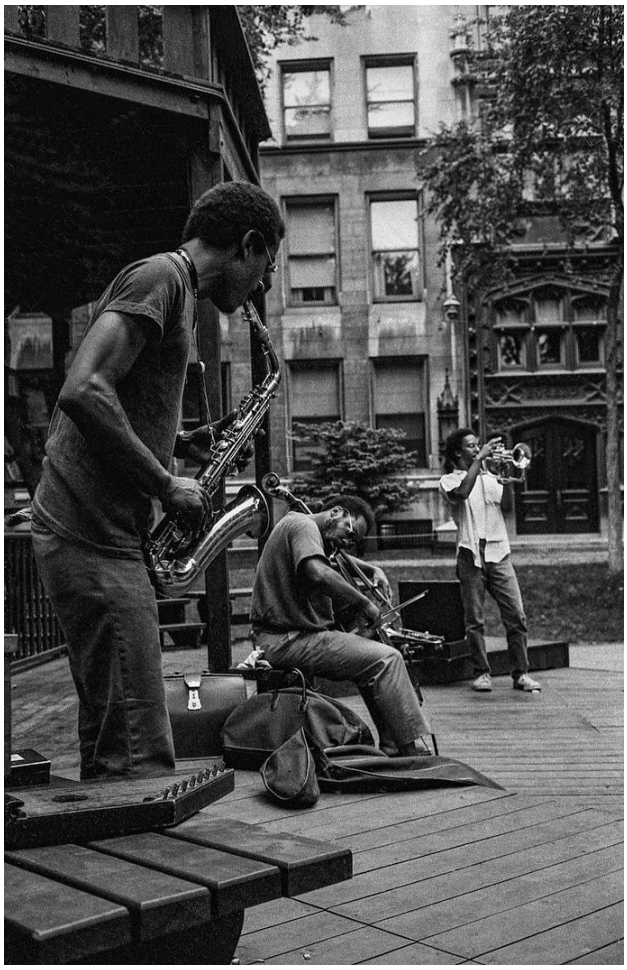
IT FEELS RIGHT TO START WITH A THUMBNAIL HISTORY from Valerie Wilmer, the British photographer and writer who published *As Serious as Your Life* in 1977, one of the first book-length attempts to document a music with as many names as heroes.

> It was at the turn of the ’sixties with the appearance of a series of recordings made by Ornette Coleman, an alto saxophonist from Texas, that the music hitherto known as “jazz” began first to be described as “free” music. Coleman, along with the pianist Cecil Taylor and the tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and, eventually, the drummer Sunny Murray, gave other musicians who were tired of the restrictions placed on their playing by earlier forms the opportunity for greater freedom. The three innovators had different approaches, but basically their message was the same: the player no longer needed to

> confine himself to a single key, or to use a set pattern of chords as a base for his improvisation, nor did he have to stick to a given time-signature or even, with the absence of a regular pulse, to bar-lines. The New Music, as it began to be known among musicians, opened up new vistas for everyone.

That "New Music" is also called free jazz, creative music, and, in cases where the jazz is hard to hear, free improvisation. Beginning in the late 1950s, Black American jazz musicians began to stretch what improvisation meant, within the context of jazz, eventually establishing a practice that seeded many other musics. It is unlikely, for example, that Sonic Youth would have gone as far out as they did, or with such intensity, without free jazz as a model. Ornette Coleman helpfully titled an album *Free Jazz* in 1961, and is not a terrible choice for Day One. It wasn't, really, but Coltrane himself cited Coleman (and others) when asked why he took his playing further into energetic dissonance, and it was Coltrane who brought the overblown (literally) and ecstatic torrents of sound to a wider audience. (Ryuichi Sakamoto credits John Coltrane with inspiring his interest in free jazz, which was so sincere that his first commercially released album—*Disappointment-Hateruma*—was a freely improvised duet.) Albert Ayler famously said, when asked about the lineage he helped establish: "Trane was the Father. Pharoah [Sanders] was the Son. I am the Holy Ghost."

"We're talking about several successive generations of musicians, which seems to me the most important point, rather than a string of innovators one after another," writer, curator, and producer John Corbett told me. Corbett has presented free improvisation concerts since the '80s and wrote the invaluable and brief *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation*, published in 2016. The lineage is not simple, and defining this fractious cohort can be more difficult than the music. "Free" is a word with almost infinite appeal and no mandate to be specific. Positing a free music implies that another kind of music (or musician) is unfree, an idea that most of the people mentioned here would not sign up for. In any of these cases, what is the proximate restriction one is free from? In the case of free verse, writing is liberated from metric forms like the villanelle or the sonnet, but Whitman did not likely think of Donne as a less free poet.



Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Lashley, and Lester Bowie of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians rehearsing on the University of Chicago campus, ca. 1965. © Alan Teller.

Where the sympathetic hears life force made concrete, the unconvinced hears bleating without the reward of melody and drums following anything but the compass of rhythm. Where the open-minded hears the eager exploration of "interaction dynamics" (as Corbett puts it), the tourist hears mutual indulgence and a lack of discipline. I first heard freely improvised recordings in the mid-'80s and the effect was profound. The energy that flows from these recordings is a rare tonic and the compositional possibilities they present are far more serious than the impatient imagine. I've rarely used free improvisation in my own music, but it is important enough to me that I helped produce a collaborative album with, and for, Derek Bailey in 1999. Free improvisation has a committed sense of respect for how time elapses and how instruments sound and these are variables one can spend a lifetime understanding.

The top results for “free jazz” playlists on Spotify feature music by the names you see here, but mostly collect jazz songs with sections of free playing, which is not the same as free jazz. Or is it? Eric Dolphy’s 1964 track “Hat and Beard” is a good example: a snaky theme that nods to Thelonious Monk, and stretches of Dolphy wringing holy whistles out of his bass clarinet. “Hat and Beard” would likely go on one of my playlists, too, though not one with “Free Jazz” in the title—but this does not indicate any confidence that I’d be right. The importance of this music is matched by its lack of borders or internal coherence. Is free music a tendency of mind, a style one can map, or a historical subset of recordings? Plenty of allegedly free music involves composition and direction; and there is, of course, another discussion one flight up, where we consider whether improvised compositions are possibly more structurally coherent and expressive than notated music. Why would the thirty-six minutes of saxophone and drum music on John Coltrane’s *Interstellar Space* (recorded in 1967) be considered somehow less clear simply because it was noisy and largely improvised? It made me see pancakes this morning and I had already eaten. Pure magic.

One thing made clear by three new books is that the people who play and love this music often form collectives to keep the work and each other alive. Whether it’s through a record label or a magazine or a community organization, people in free music take care of each other. Markus Müller’s *Free Music Production/FMP: The Living Music* is a physically big (13.2 x 9.6 inches) and affectionate accounting of a Berlin-based organization that (at least sometimes) objected to even being called a label: FMP, or Free Music Production, which released over four hundred albums between 1969 and 2010, most of them freely improvised music. Tenor saxophonist Peter Brötzmann and bassist Jost Gebers developed FMP in the mid-’60s and gave harbor to a host of musicians who were no longer entirely at home in jazz, in large part because they had been moved by the American holy trinity and wanted to create a freestanding, European response. In 1972, Gebers and Brötzmann formalized FMP on paper, including bassist Peter Kowald, pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach, and drummer Detlef Schönenberg.

Müller has collected a gorgeous array of blocky, sere flyers and black-and-white photographs from FMP shows; they take up more than half of the book, and bring home how careful and prolific this crew has been. Also, Brötzmann’s design sense is immaculate.

(He was a painter first, and still is.) But we are here for the music, and to that end, Müller reproduces the FMP manifesto, a typewritten page issued during the ’70s: “The FREE MUSIC PRODUCTION is a non-profit organization with the intention of creating, independent from the commercial music industry, a better working condition for today’s creative jazz musicians and composers, and to give the audiences a more suitable possibility for a general view of the new jazz music.” (The statement uses the words “free,” “creative,” and “new”—even the people inside the music haven’t known which words to settle on, or if they are maybe even fungible.) FMP go on to state that they will cooperate with “similar organizations in foreign countries,” including the Instant Composers Pool in Holland, and Incus in England. In 1976, Evolution Ensemble formed in Tokyo, but only went on to release one album. The traditional jazz musician looks first for gigs; the free player looks for other free players.

“Most musicians in this world know that if you think free music involves some kind of ontological freedom, you’re going to be disabused of that notion pretty fucking quickly,” Corbett told me. “Your instrument has a fixed material form, even if you disassemble it, which many have done, and no matter how freely you interact with the other musicians around you will likely sound like yourself.” In July, the label associated with his art gallery, Corbett vs. Dempsey, reissued four titles from the FMP catalogue, including music by Steve Lacy and Evan Parker, the Georg Gräwe Quintet, and Hans Reichel. The Reichel album *Bonobo Beach,* recorded in 1981, is a favorite of mine, and it throws the idea of free improvisation further into chaos. Reichel built his own guitars, rearranging the roles of the bridge and the pickup and the fretboard. His improvisations sound more like minimalism than skronking. “I think he made those instruments to explore them,” Corbett told me. "I don’t think the pieces on *Bonobo Beach* were precomposed. It’s more like the instruments were precomposed.”

As we talked it became clear that “free from” is as important as “free to” in this cohort of musicians. FMP itself was inspired by American music, at depth and at a distance, but the first reason for the group forming at all was a dress code. In 1968, when Brötzmann and his ensemble were slated to play the Berliner Jazztage (today JazzFest Berlin) but refused to wear black business suits, they were disinvited. In response, Brötzmann and Gebers started the Total Music Meeting in Berlin. Pianist Irène Schweizer remembers that, “thousands

came to the FMP concerts back then, it was really paradise. Free Music was revolutionary music, and in Berlin our music became radicalized. . . . Kowald once called this phase the 'Kaputtspielphase,' a phase of playing everything into the ground, and I was part of it. It was often insanely loud; you felt like you were in a trance. Some people got up and left, fleeing because they couldn't stand the noise, while others sat there with their mouths agape in amazement." Schweizer addresses both the importance of this vaguely defined music and its extremity, the latter being all some can hear. Remember the title of Wilmer's book: *As Serious as Your Life*. Why would you make things so hard on yourself, as a musician, when you could simply play the kind of music that pleases labels and listeners? Because you can't.

Brötzmann, discussing the commitment of Gebers, saw the direct link between the spirit and the business. "I knew that we would sell 100 units and the other 500 would end up lying around. And so FMP always skirted the edge of the abyss. We've always been on the brink: *Are we broke or not?* And sometimes, when I noticed he'd put in tens of thousands into the company again after inheriting a bit of money, I'd say: *Jost, is it worth it?* But he wouldn't have it any other way. He couldn't be dissuaded. And without this insanity, without this passion, a wonderful thing like the [eleven-CD] Cecil Taylor box for example would never have happened. I remember when Cecil saw the first box, he had tears in his eyes. Something like that for sure never happened to him in his own country."

No disrespect to Brötzmann's solidarity, but Taylor's own country not only birthed the music but is also home to one of most significant collectives: the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Taylor wasn't a member but it is entirely plausible that they would have banded together to put out an eleven-CD box set for him.

Years before FMP, the Chicago collective established a template for working together. In their 1965 "Modus Operandi," they defined their purpose at length, including the idea of cultivating "music of a high artistic level for the general public through the presentation of programs designed to magnify the importance of creative music." Their concerns included "spiritual growth" and "high moral standards," and the M.O. makes repeated mention of mentoring young musicians. The AACM was founded by pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, who gave a casual comment in a 1967 interview that sums up the formal complexity that

obtains once all the organizing is done and it's time to play the free music that you've freed yourself to play: "You don't need much to get off the ground when your musicians are spontaneous enough—just rehearse and let things happen. . . . I had to write quite a bit until I had musicians who could *create* a part, and then I wrote less and less. Now I can take eight measures and play a concert." He is speaking here of his own Experimental Band, and this is quoted in Paul Steinbeck's magisterial *Sound Experiments*, a look at the AACM through "a set of ten compositions, improvisations, and recordings." Steinbeck is a musician who has worked with members of the AACM, and previously wrote *Message to Our Folks*, a book about the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the AACM's flagship band, which is still going, as is the AACM.

Sound Experiments contains many transcriptions and technical descriptions, but Steinbeck is a fluid writer and there are stories to tell. Art Ensemble member Roscoe Mitchell is part of one classic tale that led to the 1977 album, *Nonaah*. After colleague Anthony Braxton was unable to attend the Willisau Jazz Festival in Switzerland, Mitchell filled in and played a very long solo saxophone concert, much of it improvised around a theme he wrote in 1972 called "Nonaah," which the Art Ensemble had already recorded.

The crowd at Willisau was excited to see Braxton and unhappy to be confronted not with a band but with one man and a saxophone, playing a hostile theme full of big, almost cartoonish jumps. You can hear the crowd yelling; in response, Mitchell grinds out the last note of each phrase, throttling it with the distortion of the reed itself, literally blowing a raspberry back at the crowd. Eventually, the audience settles down, and Mitchell wanders into the rest of the composition, moving through quieter sections and navigating a melody that hops between octaves like a fly across the water. Mitchell later said, "The music couldn't move [until] they respected me, until they realized that I wasn't going anywhere, and if someone was going it would have . . . to be them." He moves in and out of calm passages and takes the listener through some tweaked reed distortion, noisy enough that it's hard to believe the sound involves no electronic interventions.

Part of the confusion is that this free music is the offspring of Black American jazz, which itself represents an uncanny dialectic. A music that celebrated swing and the lushness of possibility in melody created a style that inverted all of that and threw everything away

except for the instrumentation. Someone who had fallen in love with Dexter Gordon might find Roscoe Mitchell's brass serrations unbearable. But the love flows both ways and the Art Ensemble often played sumptuous, straight-time jazz, when they felt like it. Even Derek Bailey started playing in jazz trios. (For anyone who wants to see the wider picture of improvised music, his 1980 book, *Improvisation*, is an unmatched piece of argumentation and felicitous writing.) There have long been wars between the perceived mainstream and the avant-garde—look up Wynton Marsalis interviews from the 1980s and late Stanley Crouch—and more than enough suggestions that these conflicts, like most trends, are minor and generated more by the writers than those written about.

Except when they were not, and for *The Cricket*, a magazine published briefly between 1968 and 1969, these conflicts were fully serious. Created on a Gestetner mimeograph machine, all four issues of *The Cricket* were overseen by writers A. B. Spellman, Amiri Baraka, and Larry Neal, and Blank Forms has compiled them as *The Cricket: Black Music in Evolution, 1968–1969*. Had it lasted longer, the cricketers would not likely have been kind to the FMP gang. Theirs was a specific remit to defend "the history of Black Music," most often from white critics and record label owners (depicted here once as "Norm," in cartoon form). *The Cricket* was also coming straight from the practitioners themselves: Sun Ra contributed an essay about the purpose of his "space music" and Crouch, before he quit drumming and his neoconservatism kicked in, talked about the music of Horace Tapscott, a musician whose lineage stretches down into the work of Thundercat and others in today's LA jazz community. There are poems to John Coltrane and perhaps, most fittingly for what would now be called a zine, one page with only a single question repeated sixteen times, followed by many question marks: "DO YOU THINK THE MAFIA KILLED OTIS REDDING?" If the answer is yes, or even maybe, it frames what "free" can really mean.

Sasha Frere-Jones is a musician and writer living in the East Village. He recently finished a memoir, Earlier*, which will be out soon-ish; and recordings by his first band, Ui, can be heard now on Numero Group.*

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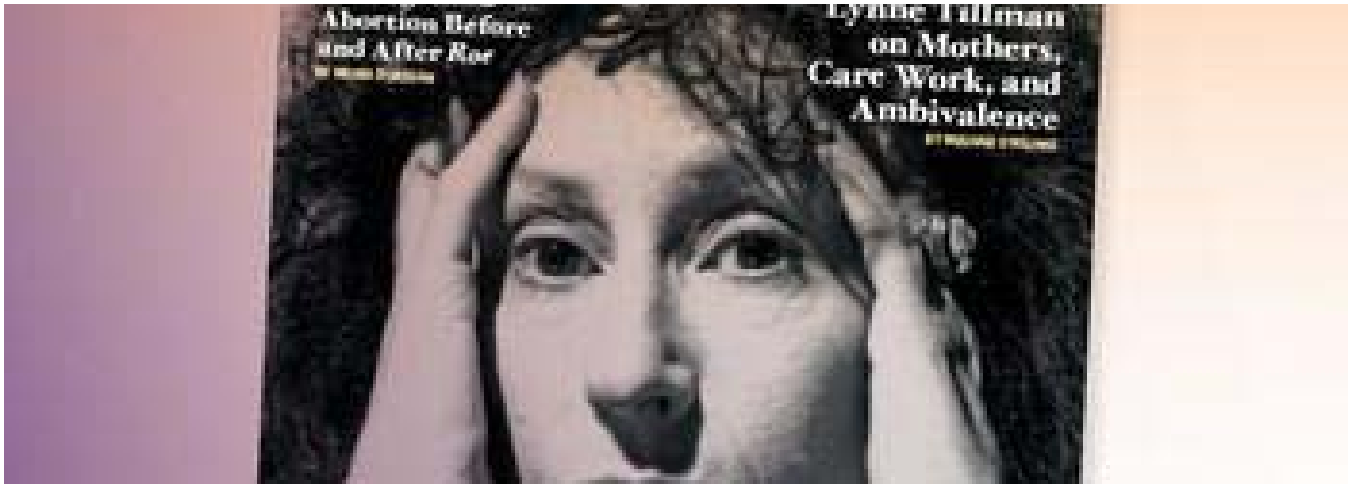

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