

Chapter Thirty

MUSIC: IMPROVISATION

*Touch is possible only at the edge of spaces.
Light is precious only during dark intervals*

Keith Jarrett
[Dark Intervals]



It's the Flying

First, go for the pleasure.
Out of pleasure, inspiration.
Out of inspiration, freedom,
Then the flying —
The flying makes all the difference!

LU

MH

LU: Improvisation & Absolute Presence

. . . . All's going well here. Am very much into piano playing these days. The art of improvisation is not easily developed. It has to do with inwardly disappearing. Moving into the silence within requires absolute presence. That's difficult initially,

because the mind, as you know, continually chatters. The trick is to resist fighting one's thoughts, and to move psychologically into that vast inner *spaciousness* in which the thoughts occur. If the re-location is pure enough, thoughts soon disappear, self disappears, inner space becomes the context and quality of the moment — and in that spaciousness the music arises like a flower in the morning sun. The work takes place primarily within, only secondarily on the level of technique.

CW

The Cosmic Soundstream

Hi, C,

Was thinking about you again last night. Indeed, you hit on a number of insights in your recent e-mail, not the least being —

"My success has always been with the understated, the rare song wherein I am lost and nothing else exists. My very best performances I must confess I can't even recall: it almost feels like someone else is playing and singing and I am just along for the ride."

I'm sure virtually all serious improvisational musicians have known this feeling, but you are the first I have encountered who has expressed it truly well. My own experience over the past few years has been like that — beyond will, beyond thought, a disappearance of the "I," and a sense that the music streaming through me is playing itself. And afterwards, not a trace of recollection of what transpired. I don't remember a thing.

There remains only a tremendous sense of having ascended beyond my personal self, into an extraordinarily vital and vitalizing domain in which music exists almost as an objective Platonian Essence, a kind of Cosmic soundstream with a life of its own that I just happened to tap into. I know, vagueness becomes the linguistic order

of the day — but how say it otherwise? It's a glorious feeling, almost a divine feeling, something one can easily live for in and of itself, as you pointed out so well.

RK Stretching Out: “Practice Spontaneity”

Wonderful question about improvisation, R. Thanks for asking. In a nutshell, I would say, don't wait until you're on stage to improvise. To the contrary, in the privacy of your own living room or studio, start stretching out. Try things, work with the harmonic structure of a completed song; see what you can come up with melodically while singing the lyrics and following the structure. Experiment. See what happens. Watch new doors open. It's fun.

One good way is to create a structure based on only one or two chords. That gives you lots of room in which to sail up and over and through the material. You can expand the melodies, move away from the chords into dissonance, creating tension, then relieving tension by returning to consonance.

The whole idea is to "practice spontaneity." You learn how to crack through self-consciousness. By improvising, letting go, stretching out, and "giving-up yourself" in a private context — by liberating yourself from the need to control every note, nuance, and pre-composed pattern — you learn how to enter the no-mind state in which "the music plays you."

In this kind of approach, you don't force the music into pre-composed patterns. You *follow* the music, letting it create its own magic. This "giving up the self" and moving into "selflessness" and going with the music's own flow is at the heart of improvisation. Instead of starting from the pre-composed music, which tells you what to play, you start from nothing whatsoever; you let the music itself bubble up to your inner ear on its own; you let it lead you in-the-moment. Once you get the feel of that no-mind state, it's like flying.

At first, you may feel awkward; you may worry about "mistakes"; you may feel insecure about not retaining control. As you continue improvising, "giving up," trying things out, you will begin to relax, and pretty soon the music will start coming through you with a life of its own. It will feel good, and you will see clearly what I mean. Trust the music. It will always lead you right.

Once you get the hang of it, you will feel more confident. Then, in live performances, you will be able to try things out a little bit, then a little more, eventually a lot. You will be able to state the song and its themes, then improvise upon them, with them, and through them. When you feel you have said what you have to say, you return to the theme (if you so choose). By practicing stretching out in private and gaining a feeling for it, you will eventually be able to confidently and effectively bring this dimension into performance.

DS *Recording Phantom Light*

For my first solo piano CD, *Phantom Light*, the recording process was much easier for me than in the past.

Experiences during the Tim years helped, as did experiences recording my solo guitar album *California Sigh* in 1988. Also, I have appeared in concert a number of times while living here in Oakhurst, particularly during a two-year period not long ago when a friend of mine and I traveled around central California giving poetry readings (and hosted a once-a-week poetry radio show). Whenever there was a tuned piano at those readings I played piano as well as read poetry. So previous recording experiences, plus dozens of live poetry/piano performances, have enabled me to sit down and play without undue anxiety. Adrenalin initially, yes, but I quickly become involved and the music flows.

That flow took me many years to learn. Improvising my own guitar music in Santa

For several years was enormously helpful. In order for the music to flow naturally and smoothly, one has to step aside, get out of the way. It is not I who play the music, control it, direct it, make it go places. Just the opposite. I leave, the music appears as if on its own, and I simply pass it through me, not leading, but following it wherever it goes. Self-consciousness immediately constricts the process. Selflessness liberates it.

Of course, in a live performance, one can and must ignore and override mistakes. In a recording studio a mistake can crack or shatter an otherwise good improvisational performance. That's why most people rehearse, memorize and reproduce, a process that pretty much eliminates mistakes. And then there's overdubbing, in which tracks can be layered and emphasized or de-emphasized. If there's enough money available, one can edit out even the smallest mistakes, insert replayed passages, and move on. All of these recording methods have conditioned the modern listener to the sound of technical perfection and musical effects that simply were not possible during the eras of live recordings only.

So my process is a daring one, certainly not unique, but extremely challenging. Nothing rehearsed or memorized. Everything improvised. No overdubbing. Minimal money for reparations of flaws. As a result, *Phantom Light*, while not mistake free, is something of an accomplishment.

Real life (contrasted with artifice) has an improvisational flow to it. Everything is moving (which Van Gogh saw with awesome clarity). Trees, clouds, rivers, and landscapes are not symmetrical. We don't make love in locked-in metrical rhythms. Hardly anybody speaks in well-structured, complete sentences (conversation being a form of improvisation). Life is grand this way, is it not?

We already have plenty of preconceived artificial musics masquerading as spontaneous productions, and many of them are terrific. But only in jazz do we find improvisation as a dominant style of creating, and even there, most of the improvisations take place within tight, repetitive harmonic/rhythmic structures (song forms), in which musicians fill in preconceived harmonic progressions with a multitude of variations, sort of like completing crossword puzzles, yes? (Cecil

Taylor and other avant-garde musicians being notable exceptions — they create the forms themselves, and move outside of conventional Western melodies/harmonies/rhythms.)

Anyway, on *Phantom Light* I sat down and played, and recorded what I played. Very little anxiety. Complete trust in the music itself (which in my view has a life of its own). Stepped aside egoically, listened, followed, played whatever came along, then later selected pieces that worked, sequenced them in an order that felt good to me, and went with it.

Each piece emerged out of a "zone." I have certain zones that I sit down with, a given key, a given general mood. In that sense, there is an element of preconception. From there, everything is new to me (although I generally work within conventional, relatively simple harmonic movements). The music starts from a seed, a few notes; it sprouts; arpeggios, textures and melodies develop; new leaves appear; sometimes a theme or two from previous explorations of the same zone appear; they're incorporated; new branches appear; everything expands and grows and becomes fully developed — seeds, sprouts, branches, leaves, flowers in profusion — then it concludes on its own. Sometimes it takes three minutes, or five, sometimes ten or fifteen, whatever feels right. It's got a life of its own, which I respect, cherish, and honor.

Thank you for your observations. I am quite touched that you like what you hear.

SL **Beyond *Phantom Light***

I keep telling myself to get back into the recording studio, which I may well do. But the recording process itself presents a hurdle that's difficult for me to leap: self-consciousness. Thinking. Worrying about "mistakes." Being aware of playing.

It's the very thing that I transcend when playing at home in the living room. It's that ecstasy of transmental, non-self presence that I want and need when recording, but which the process inhibits — or even destroys. As a result, it's very difficult to enter the studio, sit down, disappear into transegoic meditation as I do at home, and then simply let the music flow out and up on its own. Not that I can't do it — *Phantom Light* attained that quality pretty well.

But the place I've been since then is even more evolved — and more demanding. In order to go deeper and higher, I've got to become so incredibly pure, so totally absent, that any simple thought that flits across the empty inner screen can be catastrophic. Or, worse, in front of the microphone it is difficult to make the leap even to begin with!

(Although that hurdle can be surmounted — just jump in; once one gets used to the temperature of the water, so to speak, everything's okay, as long as one can leap up and out of self-consciousness, and stay there, like air merged with air.)

DS **Cecil and Me: Improvisation**

“Who I am herenow” tumbles out in torrents when I light a few candles at night, open the windows a bit so the streamsong outside whispers into the living room, and sit down and play piano.

Instead of “making” music, I transcend egoic control mechanisms with ever-increasing ease, disappear into that vast, spacious, inner silence, out of which the music arises and pours forth with a life of its own. New music keeps emerging, new depths are plumbed, new heights appear, and the flow is rich, limpid, voluminous and true. Have now gone well beyond *Phantom Light*.

I know you've checked out Cecil Taylor's solo piano works (perhaps *Indent*, *Silent Tongues*, or *In Florescence*?). A couple of days ago I re-listened to those albums

and found myself smiling. The principle of flow is the same, but Cecil and I are temperamentally quite different. Aside from technical considerations (he's a bedazzling master), he is of course uniquely himself and so am I. We both "disappear" and follow the music, qualifying its colors, shades, emotions, and atmospheric climates with our individual personalities. At that point a significant difference makes itself apparent, because we are vastly different people.

He comes from urban fury, a jagged, angular perception, a fiercely intense approach to fragmented thought and excitement-oriented feeling. I, on the other hand, play with incredible intensity these days, but from an awareness rooted in a smooth, trance inducing, wholistic flow that keeps the mood suspended in serenity, even when playing with power and complexity.

For both of us, form is not externally imposed (like standard jazz, in which pre-given song forms are filled out in new ways; or like crossword puzzles, where the structure is pre-given, and we fill in the blanks). In this purely improvised music, form emerges organically from within itself, each improvised phrase related with the previous phrase, giving life and new light to the next phrase, with motifs inwardly repeated or alluded to throughout the spontaneously emergent flowering. When the music completes itself there is a wonderful sense of naturalness, aesthetic unity, wholeness. So our methodology (using that word loosely) is similar, and our approach to flow is similar, but our temperaments are worlds apart. Hence, the natural formulations are very different in terms of style and tone and ambience. It's not as if one can listen to both of us and say, "Well, Cecil Taylor already did it," because the music I'm playing extends itself from my particular psycho-spiritual orientation, and that orientation has nothing to do with Cecil's. We are very different people playing very different musics.

It's obvious, of course, that no one person is "modern art." As you know well, there are dozens of modern artists. All are original, even though they work within a general generic category called "modern" (or Impressionistic, or Postmodern, whatever). And so I find myself these days finding and feeling deeply and truly that musical flow to which I gave the nascent expression in *Phantom Light*.

The music's growing by leaps and bounds, and Cecil is the only guy I know of who has approached playing in this fashion to a similar degree. I haven't explored Keith Jarrett's solo piano works very much, although I intend to move into him and his music in the not too distant future. I have a feeling that he and I are more closely attuned temperamentally than Cecil and I. (There are other avant-gardists, of course, but I'm talking about that riverrush quality, in my case fluid, smooth, unfragmented, sometimes harmonically tonal, at other times [and more and more often] atonal [creating tonal groupings not based on scales, but on clusters of notes outside of conventional scales]).

While I feel harshness and aggressive excitement in Cecil's riverflow, I feel an uplifting, clearlight, hypnotrantic joy in mine. Odd I should find myself in his company, but here we are. I feel like he's a friend, which, musically speaking, is unusual for me. Yin/yang stuff, you know?

If there's a drawback, it has to do with energy, with launching up and out of my egoically controlling orientation, into that spacious, relaxed, free-flowing no-mind place. Self-consciousness kills or severely inhibits spontaneity (which makes recording difficult; that's why most people memorize, rehearse, then reproduce it in the studio). So, how to dissolve or transcend self-consciousness?

Chemical means are always available, of course, but then one becomes dependent upon them for "inspiration"; more is required to get to the same place again; they burn out the psyche, leaving less and less to work with next time; and of course if one doesn't strike that perfect balance between mental-egoic efficacy and inspired no-mind transpersonal clarity, he winds up merely stoned, sloshed, sloppy, incompetent and useless.

Therefore, I usually begin by playing whatever comes easily, starting with something simple, safe, pretty, and let the music naturally take me into greater depths as it goes along, until finally I'm into it, gone, and the music flies up and away on its own.

Loved your Swiss analyst's line, "*And who vill you be ven you geet zerrh?*"

Uncannily canny, right? I remember telling my therapist in LA that I wanted to leave the city and go someplace else, where I could just disappear and be anonymous. He smiled and said, "Can't you do that here?"

MH

Keith Jarrett & Improvisation

I continue hanging out with Keith Jarrett's solo piano CDs. What a brilliant improviser. I learn as I listen, following the ways in which he develops his musical flow, evolving great clouds of music out of usually simple thematic phrases, starting from nothing (literally) and then composing live spontaneously. Great stuff. Full presence-in-the-present and of course great ears and great technique. The first step in generating music is listening. He listens to the music bubbling up from within and instantly follows it, giving it life, body, reality.

By spending time with his CDs, and then sitting down and playing from within a similar mind-set, I find myself improving every day. I don't copy anything of his, but do draw from various scales I pick up from him, utilizing this or that scale as an aural context in which I feel comfortable generating my own stream-of-consciousness improvisations. I've been doing this for some time, but the flow, the musical depth, and the technical skills continually take on new dimensions. Every once in a while I think about zipping back into the recording studio, although I still don't feel quite confident enough. Ah, well, perhaps soon.

AP

Keith Jarrett: Clearing the Mind

Great listening: Keith Jarrett's solo piano concerts, particularly *The Paris Concert*, *La Scala*, *The Vienna Concert*, and the *Bremen/Lausanne Concerts*, all on ECM.

He too clears his mind, and from that emptiness, music flowers. He connects directly with the music-pulse and lets the pulse play him. Others have done that, even as I do these days, but I like his sensibility, his fluidity, sensitivity, lyricism, and his unending flow of creative ideas. Of all of the wonderful musicians alive today, I feel closest to him in temperament and approach.

When you get a relaxed night at home by yourself, maybe light a few candles, lie back and listen to, say, the first two tracks of *The Paris Concert*, or the second track of *The Vienna Concert*, and you'll see what I mean.

SL **Living Room Improvisations**

For myself, as much as I love the passions of popular music (especially Jeff and Tim Buckley, for example), or as much as I love the extraordinary beauty and power of brilliantly composed European classical music (such as Chopin and Bach), I hardly ever find the same quality of intensity there (Chopin's *Nocturnes* come pretty close) as I find in improvised music. There is certainly intensity in classical music, but in general it's not the same *kind* and quality I'm talking about. For the particular quality of almost non-personal yet intimate beauty, I have to go to, well, to myself!

Hence, I lose myself in piano improvisations here at home. I know, it might be considered hedonism (which is wonderful in its appropriate domain). But in a certain way, I am doing just the opposite: *losing* myself, disappearing, letting the music play me. It's as if I am releasing the music-energy directly, without filtering it through any sort of intellectual or emotional strainer. I'm not a *self* anymore, just a medium, a catalyst, a non-presence bringing the music-flow through me without qualification. Yes, the musical language I use is mine, but the music itself — its shapes, forms, fluctuations, permutations — all of that is pure spontaneity, like rushing springwaters.

Alas, so much beautiful, impassioned, & “transplendent” music has flown up and into the air, disappearing into the no-thingness from whence it came. It's as if it descends from somewhere else — not literally somewhere else, but from the highest, most selfless dimension of my own being — then fills me up, pulses down my arms, through my fingers and out into the piano keys, emerging as pure sound-swirls, undisturbed by the intellectual demands of formal composition or the structural demands of filling up preconceived forms (the way traditionally-oriented jazz musicians infuse standard song structures with their improvisations, following the chord changes and pre-scripted formal organization).

It's a way of playing I love, and a way of *being* in which I am more purely, truly and deeply my highest, authentic self than in just about any other domain (disappearing in sex is very much a similar transcendent feeling).

MR **Music and Meditation**

Regarding meditation, the seers have often said, "Meditation is emptying the mind of its contents." That has been my experience, primarily through the playing of music, sitting down, becoming still and empty, allowing music to flow up and out, listening to it *without self*, giving it voice as it rises.

If I think, or drift off into dreaming, everything goes wrong. If I set mind aside, open up, become totally absent and completely receptive, completely in-the-present, the music flows like rivers. I become that "hollow bamboo flute" the seers talk about. This process transfers into daily life for me. I think less, and become more open, empty, clear, perceptive, insightful, spontaneous, creative — not "doing" anything, just being, and the doing takes care of itself. Lao Tzu's "wei-wu-wei," action through non-action.

Meanwhile, the great ones speak of meditation with utmost respect (including Krishnamurti, who meditated, but without methodology). Since it is a deeply

personal (and transpersonal) interior issue, it seems to me rather like certain other dimensions in the course of spiritual development. Check things out for yourself. Find that which fits with you. Spend time with it. (You might eventually want to read Osho's *Book of the Secrets*, talked about in one of my other e-mails. I found the meditations using sound to be especially helpful for me.) Since you are already involved with yoga, hey, great, move straight-ahead, yes? (Osho also did a series of ten books on Patanjali and Yoga, the first four of which are still available, called *Yoga: Science of the Soul*.)

When all is said and done, it seems to me that each and every way offers something of value to the sincere seeker. For some it is action. For others, non-action. For some it is this or that orthodox religion. For others it is spiritual involvement without the slightest touch of dogma. For some, Zen is the only way. For others, no-way is the only way.

I am a great supporter of freedom, independence, self-exploration, finding one's own way by seeking and finding those teachers with whom one resonates deeply, profoundly and truly. By delving into their work, learning from them, growing but without dependence upon them, expanding, and evolving with their help, one becomes a larger, deeper fuller person — and then eventually moves on, sometimes a week later, sometimes years later — moves on with love and gratitude to still greater heights and depths, because the journey, as you know, is endless. Each mountaintop reveals a still higher mountain on the other side. That is not discouraging. To the contrary, it is thrilling. Spiritual expansion is endless, open, forever vital and alive.

The hard part is finding the right connection. Once you do, then go for it, pursue it, dive deeply and totally into it. And one connection leads to others, because all of us are in this thing together, are we not? The rewards are vast and unending. Creative evolution knows no bounds.

All the best, M.

Keep me posted,

Talk with you soon!

L