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MICHAEL DESSEN

Improvising in a Different Clave

Steve Coleman and AfroCuba de Matanzas

> Let me begin by saying that, to some, my notions concerning voice in improvised music may border on the realm of speculation; however, I am suggesting that the door for research is open. To be specific: one researcher, Mr. Walter J. Ong, a University Professor of Humanities and Psychiatry at St. Louis University in Missouri, has said: "In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit."
>
> I once asked the late Jo Jones, "What was Lester Young's philosophy concerning improvised music?" He promptly replied, "Lester played his philosophy."
> —Yusef Lateef

Like many of the improviser-composers coming out of African-American creative traditions in the late twentieth century, Steve Coleman has been active in a wide range of cultural and musical spaces.[1] While known within the jazz world as a key member of the M-Base collective,[2] Coleman has also collaborated with musicians in Cuba, Senegal, India, Ghana, and Indonesia, worked on computer music at IRCAM,[3] and taught through grassroots community residencies as well as in universities.

In 1996, Coleman took one of his groups, the Mystic Rhythm Society, to Cuba, where they collaborated with AfroCuba de Matanzas. Led since 1957 by Francisco Zamora Chirino, AfroCuba de Matanzas performs a wide range of folkloric music and dance from the main Afrocuban subcultures, including Lucumí[4] (Yoruba), Arará (Dahomey), Abakuá and Bantu (Congo), as well as secular rumba genres. The two groups of musicians and dancers worked together for two weeks, performing at the Havana Jazz Festival and recording a compact disc.

In this essay, I focus on this collaboration in order to develop a number

of arguments about innovative forms of contemporary improvised music and cultural practice. The first section situates the Coleman/AfroCuba project within a trajectory of musical experimentation centered on improvisation, spirituality, and intercultural dialogue, suggesting that these linked concerns form an important thread within African-American creative music traditions since the mid-twentieth century. Next, I ground these ideas in a discussion of the specific musical strategies these two groups used, drawing on both interviews and music analysis. In the final section, I explore connections between these musical methodologies and the concerns emerging in contemporary cultural studies; I argue that this kind of intercultural improvised music is itself a form of theorizing about culture.

Following Lateef's passage above, then, this essay centers on the idea of improvised music as a form of philosophizing. In addition, both Lateef's reference to the world of humanistic academic scholarship and his suggestion that "the door for research is open" refer to another kind of dialogue that concerns me here. Although academic scholarship on music has broadened in scope over the past decade, far less attention has been paid to the intercultural modes of experimentalism emerging in contemporary improvised music. Another central claim of this essay, then, is that this project, along with the larger traditions it references, draws on sophisticated approaches to musical improvisation in order to interrogate culture itself, resonating in this way with much of contemporary critical theory.

What, then, is this music saying? I confess to being reluctant to make definitive exegetical claims, not out of piety to poststructuralist theories of subjectivity but rather because, as a musician myself, I am acutely aware of the limitations of writing (especially mine) to encompass the richness of what I hear. Yet being a musician has also taught me the value of communicating across our differences, however imperfect and incomplete this process may be. In this spirit, this essay weaves my own hearings and interpretations with those of participants in the hope of passing through some of Lateef's open doors and expanding the dialogic qualities of this music itself outward into broader communities.

Contexts and Histories: Spirituality, Politics, and Musical Innovation

In his liner notes to the recording of *Sign and the Seal,* Coleman points to the Machito–Charlie Parker recording of "Mango Mangüé" as his first exposure to African-American and Afrocuban traditions "coming together through common roots," explaining that the collaboration with AfroCuba de Matanzas represents his own eventual response to that "initial inspiration." This reference comes as no surprise, as Parker's work with Machito and Mario Bauzá, along with Dizzy Gillespie's collaborations with Chano Pozo (discussed by Jason Stanyek earlier in this book), represented an important step in the developing dialogue between African-American and Afrocuban traditions.

This dialogue predates the 1940s; as John Storm Roberts documents in detail, what Jelly Roll Morton called the "latin tinge" was a central influence on the development of early African-American music.[5] Still, artists emerging in the 1940s such as Gillespie, Pozo, Bauzá and Parker were especially significant in a number of ways. For one, their innovations were part of the broader claim so-called bebop musicians made to be taken more seriously as artists, despite the racially coded conceptions of high and low culture within the United States at the time.[6] Part of this challenge had to do specifically with improvisation. As George Lewis argues, these musicians "created new possibilities for the construction of an African-American improvisative musicality that could define itself as explicitly experimental" ("Improvised," 95). The fact that intercultural experiments such as Gillespie and Pozo's were situated within this larger redefinition of improvisation, art music, and the boundaries of African-American music is extremely important because it distinguishes their work from the hybrid forms and crossover performers from the earlier decades that Roberts describes. Equally crucial was the fact that these collaborations in the 1940s embodied both a pan-African and an internationalist stance that was simultaneously musical and political (a topic that Stanyek also discusses in his essay in this volume, see chapter 5).

These collaborations reverberated in different ways over the following decades. On the one hand, many musicians continued to develop hybrid approaches that integrated African-American, Caribbean, and Brazilian musical traditions, generating a wide range of music now commonly referred to as "latin jazz."[7] At the same time, however, the collaborative work of Gillespie, Bauzá, Pozo, Parker, and others in the 1940s also served as a starting point for a more explicitly experimental trajectory of intercultural improvised music. From the mid-twentieth century to the present, collaboration with musicians from other cultures and/or creative appropriation of non-Western traditions has been central to the work of numerous improvisers, including people like John Coltrane, Randy Weston, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, Yusef Lateef, Don Cherry, Ornette Coleman, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, David Murray, Wadada Leo Smith, Jon Jang, Michele Rosewoman, Jin Hi Kim, Anthony Davis, Susie Ibarra, Steve Coleman, Anthony Brown, Glen Horiuchi, Evan Parker, and Miya Masaoka.

There is no singular approach to improvised music or to intercultural collaboration shared by all of these musicians, in part since they emerged in different time periods and sociomusical networks; these include the "jazz avant-garde" of the late 1950s and the 1960s, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the Asian-American improvisers community, the European improvisers network, the so-called downtown New York improvisers, and M-Base.[8] Despite this diversity, among the diverse modes of experimentalism that have flowered out of the jazz tradition since the mid-twentieth century, a key thread involves experimental improvisation as a basis for intercultural practice.

Spirituality is another central trope in many of these collaborations, and is particularly important in the case of Cuba. Many Cuban musicians themselves such as Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba have syncretized jazz with Afrocuban genres. Yet foreigners have also sought to integrate more recent developments in jazz with explicitly religious Cuban forms. Michele Rosewoman, leader of the New Yor-Uba ensemble and one of the first North American musicians to integrate post-1950s forms of jazz with Cuban folkloric music, describes how she came to study Cuban music after being "touched by the more spiritual aspects" of the genre early in her career.[9] Such comments must be read within a larger history of discourses, long employed by musicians based in African-American music traditions, through which improvised and collaborative music making is linked with notions of universality, communicating across cultural difference, and spiritual transformation.

Yet this emphasis on spirituality and essence has often taken shape in relation to debates about how African-American music and jazz specifically is—or should be—situated politically. John Coltrane, for example, is one of the more prominent figures who foregrounded questions of spirituality and transcendence in the context of the divisive and politically charged 1960s music world. In his famous interview with Marxist historian Frank Kofsky, Coltrane responds to loaded questions in an oblique way, affirming Kofsky's leftist politics on some level yet unequivocally placing his music and his goals within a larger, spiritual context.[10] This discursive legacy has continued to be relevant for many musicians working within the trajectory of intercultural, experimental improvised music I mentioned above. These include Asian-American improvisors Jon Jang and Francis Wong, who deal with political themes in their music yet simultaneously stress their discomfort with the idea of "political music" because it rarely includes spiritual concerns, a point Wong situates within a larger critique of the "separation of politics and spirituality" in the twentieth century (1997).

Similarly, both Coleman and Chirino dismissed any simple readings that would see their project as a comment upon the political relationship between the United States and Cuba. Coleman insisted that his interest in Cuba was about spiritual traditions and that his goals had nothing to do with the problems between the United States and Cuba, which he referred to as "only obstacles" to what they were trying to accomplish. Similarly, Chirino responded to my mention of politics by saying that "a musician is not a politician . . . he is a musician," and stressed that musicians are important in cultural exchange but ultimately act within their own field.

However, respect for musicians' self-described goals and concerns should not blind us to the ways in which notions of spirituality and universality can obscure the power differentials that are a part of intercultural music making and that are clearly important in the case of a collaboration involving Cuban and North American musicians. Because of the U.S. embargo, Cuban musicians who chose to stay on the island after the 1959 revolution were largely cut off from the substantial commercial opportunities that the United States represented. Although this restriction has slowly begun to change over the last decade, the legalization of the dollar in the mid-1990s and the earlier collapse of the Soviet Union created a complex dual economy in Cuba where the dollar is extremely valued compared to the peso. As a result, Cuban musicians working with North American and European ones are not only able to connect with more international infrastructures and exposure, but to use work abroad to earn dollars that are extremely valuable back home. As Ariana Hernandez-Reguant puts it, "the introduction of market policies [in Cuba] has resulted in social stratification, first and foremost within the music profession, due to its position at the forefront of the encounter with transnational capitalism."[11] Thus, regardless of the sincerity of anyone's spiritual interests, it is not difficult to imagine that many Cubans see their foreign colleagues in terms of access and that they would hesitate to criticize them openly or assert a more leading role in a supposedly collaborative project for fear of losing their gig.

For this reason, I felt it important to ask Chirino about this question of agency, even though most of the tracks on this recording have author credits shared between Coleman and Chirino, and even though I suspected he would be unlikely to say anything negative about Coleman to me. When I mentioned the idea of North American jazz musicians hiring Cubans (especially percussionists) but only using them in superficial ways, Chirino recognized the tendency but emphasized that his work with Coleman was different; in fact, he proudly situated it as a historical advance in comparison to earlier periods. While he praised Chano Pozo, Machito, and the many other Cuban musicians who "invaded the United States" in the

1940s, he claimed that the Cuban percussion in those earlier collaborations was generally used "on a secondary level, like a background accompaniment." He distinguished his project with Coleman by emphasizing that if AfroCuba de Matanzas were to falter even slightly, the entire piece would fall apart, and that they were a "primordial part" of the process, something he felt was "the opposite of the jazz that was played in the United States before, in those years."[12] In contrast, the Coleman/AfroCuba project involved an entire folkloric ensemble of more than ten members performing religious and secular music from their regular repertoire; even more important, as I will discuss in the next section, this project is based less on the idea that one group should "accompany" the other than on group improvisation as a way to facilitate complex layers of multiple narratives, and on compositional and improvisational frameworks not limited to popular song forms. In this respect, this project—unlike most contemporary "latin jazz"—is deeply informed by many of the experiments with more flexible, open-form improvisational structures that took place in the African-American avant-garde of the mid- to late-1960s. A work like Coltrane's *Ascension,* for example, resonates with Coleman's approach here in that both link a radically heterogeneous kind of large-scale group improvisation with the notion of music as a spiritually transformative process.

This association between spirituality and more open-ended approaches to group improvisation can be traced back to even earlier innovations such as the "modal jazz" of the late 1950s and early 1960s. As Ingrid Monson argues, "spiritual ideas of essence, unity and transcendence served as one of several factors shaping the deepening interest of jazz musicians in non-Western religious and musical expressions," an interest that she suggests was "embodied musically in the more open forms generated by modal improvisational thinking" ("Oh Freedom," 157). When I showed Coleman this comment from Monson, he more or less agreed, but extended her argument to include a broader, more mythic context for the kind of music making he is involved in:

> Using John Coltrane as one possible example (although the issue is much more complicated than that including hundreds of other musicians) there is definitely a more conscious concern for universal principles of essence and creation being expressed in the music. However what is just as important as what Coltrane and his colleagues accomplished is what they were "trying" to accomplish! What I mean by this is in most creative activity you have the thing realized and the "idea" that is driving what was realized. I am looking at that idea.
>
> Of course Coltrane played with Dizzy during and right after the time when Dizzy was very involved with trying to connect with a certain non-European rhythmic aesthetic with his experiments with Chano Pozo et al. You can also hear this direction in the experimental things that Bird did with the Machito Orchestra. Many musicians were getting inspiration from Caribbean, African, and eventually Asi[an] sources such as India. This was on both a subconscious and conscious level bu[t I] think that there is a larger issue here than the mixing of different styles of music a[nd] that is what I am getting at. I think what we see happening here is the slow intr[o]duction of another level of consciousness and what was happening in music, a[rt,] dance, literature, physics etc. is just the manifestation of this among creative peop[le] which is where these things tend to show up first among the human race. This co[n]sciousness has a lot to do with the way we are communicating and I think that sym[]bolic communication is at the base of it. ("Email")

While Coleman is fundamentally interested in "the idea" and the tran[s]formation of consciousness he feels is at work here, he also relates th[is] rather mythic process to specific musical practices, especially rhythm[ic] ones. With this interdependence of form and content in mind, I turn no[w] to questions of musical process in this particular project.

Strategies and Strata of Intercultural Improvisation

"Universal principles of essence" notwithstanding, all participants com[]mented that the initial encounter between the two ensembles was anythin[g] but comfortable. Laila Jenkins, a dancer in Coleman's ensemble, referred t[o] the "ultimate shyness" and "cultural barriers" that the groups faced at th[e] beginning of the project (including, I would add, a language barrier).[1] Both Chirino and former AfroCuba de Matanzas member Ramon Garci[a] Pérez explained that while they were very familiar with "jazz" and "lati[n] jazz," they recognized immediately that Coleman's musical language wa[s] altogether different from theirs. Chirino referred repeatedly to the fact tha[t] Coleman's rhythmic practices, involving unusual rhythmic cycles and me[]ters (for example, five, seven, eleven, and so forth), "really sounded strang[e] to us." Similarly, the members of Coleman's group were unfamiliar wit[h] Afrocuban folkloric music and, according to Coleman, were speechles[s] upon hearing AfroCuba de Matanzas play at the first rehearsal, in whic[h] each group performed for the other something from its standard repertoir[e] (Coleman 2000). After that first experience, many musicians in bot[h] groups apparently felt discouraged, with doubts as to whether the projec[t] would work at all.

Gradually, though, the groups became more comfortable and devel[]oped strategies for working together. The two leaders and some of the ke[y] members of each group took more prominent roles than others; yet in th[e] words of Yosvany Terry, a Cuban saxophonist who acted as a translato[r] and bridge between the two ensembles, the fact that it was "something s[o] new which was happening in that moment" meant that developing th[e] pieces was "very collaborative," with musicians in both groups makin[g]

suggestions and remaining very attentive to what was happening. Attentiveness and careful listening was also stressed by Chirino, who pointed out that because of the strangeness of the experience, his musicians had to "put all five senses" into what they were doing while maintaining a high level of concentration.

Each of the tracks the groups eventually recorded contained a religious or secular piece from the repertoire of AfroCuba de Matanzas. Simultaneously, Coleman's group added another musical layer of rhythmic cycles that, while based on the same smaller-scale rhythmic subdivisions used by AfroCuba de Matanzas, were usually structured in different lengths. As a result, the beginnings of one group's cycle did not frequently line up with those of the other, and a thick fabric of periodic patterns emerged upon which various kinds of soloistic improvisations and call and response passages were layered.

Notation is a gross oversimplification here, but as an example of this technique I include in Figure 1 an approximation of selected rhythmic lines from the piece "The Metamorphosis of Amalia." Throughout this twelve-minute piece, AfroCuba de Matanzas performs a yambú, a style of rumba based on an eight-beat clave pattern (fig. 1). This clave acts as a core around which numerous other rhythmic patterns of the same length are performed by percussionists in the Cuban ensemble. The phrase structure of the vocal call and response *(inspiración y coro)* that Chirino and other members of AfroCuba de Matanzas sing, is also based on phrase lengths of two bars, four bars, eight bars, and so forth.

After a twelve-second introduction by AfroCuba, Coleman's group enters and, for the rest of the piece, simultaneously performs rhythms structured around beat groupings of 4 and a half, 9, 18, and so forth (figs. 2 and 3). Although they are working with the same underlying quarter-note pulse as AfroCuba, the cycles Coleman's group plays create a 9:8 (or 4.5:4 or 18:16) ratio with those of AfroCuba. Like the underlying yambú cycles, those of Coleman's group also exist on both smaller- and larger-scale phrase structures; some exist at the level of nine beats (such as the repeating cowbell pattern in fig. 2) and others only repeat at larger multiples of nine beats (such as the 72-beat line in fig. 3).

As in most of the pieces on the album, these kinds of rhythmic relationships create a thick groove upon which various musical narratives enter into dialogue. This layering of different solos or call-and-response sections is often extremely dense. In another piece entitled "The Seal," for example,

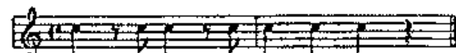
Figure 1

Figure 2

the ensemble begins to increase in intensity just before the four-minute mark, at which point the rapper Kokayi (from Coleman's group) enters with freestyle vocals, alongside a chorus sung by the Cuban vocalists. The groove is augmented here by a repeated rhythmic horn line (Coleman's group), that builds further as Chirino adds soloistic calls between the choruses, and Kokayi is replaced by Coleman improvising on alto sax. By seven minutes in, these added events and the combined ensemble's responses to them—especially from the lead percussionists in each group—have changed the overall feel (as well as pulse speed) considerably from the beginning of the track. This kind of large-scale transformation is an important site for group improvisation and dialogue, as are the interactions between the different soloistic and call-and-response statements themselves on a more middle-ground level and the more microlevel negotiation of the groove going on continually within and between the two groups' rhythm sections.

In terms of how group improvisation and cultural traditions are approached, then, this music doesn't quite fit into Derek Bailey's description of "non-idiomatic" or "free" improvisation as that which lacks a "commitment" to any particular idiom or style (99). As Yosvany Terry put it, "the starting point for working together was what the musicians already knew, because, I think, one can't begin working with something he doesn't know. We have to depart from somewhere." On the other hand, calling this music "idiomatic" would miss the centrality of an experimental sensibility—"departing"—that is about more than simply leaving one's idiom to embrace another. Vijay Iyer, a pianist in Coleman's group,[14] explained that Coleman "didn't go there to try to play [their music] back at them" and that "mastery of Afrocuban music was not the point":

> it wasn't Steve's project to try to create this fusion. It was more about creating music from the coexistence of these two pretty distinct traditions that have common roots. So—especially in retrospect it's easier to see—he made a point of keeping the stuff somewhat separate; it wasn't like we were all playing just in the same

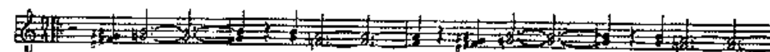
Figure 3

clave, grooving off of what those guys were doing. It was a bit more complex than that, and, in my mind, anyway, that was the metaphor for the complex relationship between our history and theirs.

Improvising within these structures thus becomes a way of negotiating those histories and relationships. Whereas Bailey's "non-idiomatic" category links experimental improvisation to an allegedly culture-free space, the model of experimentalism at work here does not seek to avoid cultural traditions so much as to bring them into dialogue and, in doing so, interrogate and transform them. Chirino also emphasized this same idea to me when speaking of the particular *sello* (seal) that AfroCuba has, a term comparable to the idea of an individual or group "sound" so often cited in jazz. In this context, he spoke of the hybrid "Batarumba" genre they invented, as well as their collaborations with symphony orchestras, jazz groups, and a Puerto Rican bomba ensemble, stressing that he was concerned with "looking for new ways, new sounds—because African culture is very rich. It's been studied, many people have unearthed a lot, but there still remains a lot to be discovered."[15]

Yet while speaking of African culture, overall, Chirino also emphasized that his musical work was very much grounded in the traditions specific to the Matanzas region.[16] He took care to differentiate the traditions of Matanzas from those of nearby Havana, and even within the context of Matanzas he emphasized his own group's distinct *sello*. This multileveled concept of tradition—as well as improvisation specifically—as operating on local, regional, national, and diasporic scales was expressed by others as well. Coleman, for example, had this to say about the section roughly seven minutes into the piece I mentioned above, "The Seal":

> First I believe that my response to what is happening here and the responses of say the Iyá [largest batá drum] player are basically the same except for some differences of emphasis as follows:
>
> I am moving at what I call a faster "rate of change," meaning I'm basically thinking about parts and responses when I'm improvising but I'm changing the parts and responses more quickly.
>
> I'm thinking on a melodic voice-leading as well as a rhythmic voice-leading level. I'm interacting in a way that is based on ideas of the traditional calls of my own subculture and not on the traditional calls in the sub-culture of the players from Matanzas (as is the Iyá player). However, the principles are basically the same as they are derived from the same source (West Africa). (Email)

Many musicians mentioned this broader diasporic level of connection, often describing it in terms of spirituality. Jenkins, for example, contrasted "Westernized" perspectives focused around "entertainment" with the more "African or African diasporic perspective" at work here, one she repeatedly described in terms of spiritual transformation. Terry commented on an even more specific way in which Coleman's musical conception fit well with that of AfroCuba, in that both conceived of music as *fundamentada*, based on something concrete:

> The concept of Steve's music is very well-founded. It is founded on something. It is not that concept [of music] that rises out of nothing. So, this is something that happens of course with Cuban culture, and especially with Afrocuban music. That everything . . . has a particular function. Everything is representing an energy, representing a saint, representing an orisha [Yoruban deity], representing something, something specific.[17]

African-American traditions, while connected in complex ways to religious and spiritual functions, are not always so directly and so explicitly religious in function as in the case of AfroCuba, a group who performs music from—and often in—ceremonial contexts. Yet Terry's characterization here comes from the fact that Coleman has pursued his own studies of African culture and ancient civilizations and that, like many other African-American musicians, he has incorporated these directly into his conception of improvisation and compositional form. For example, in the notes to his recent recording *The Sonic Language of Myth,* he describes how the "information" on this recording "is being derived from Kemetic,[18] astrological, astronomical, and metaphysical sources, all of which are symbolized through the use of structures (forms, rhythms, and tones plus intent, emotion, and intuition) that masquerade as composition."

This resonance Terry points to was not lost on the members of AfroCuba. Sandy Pérez also suggested that although Coleman's own esoteric studies of African culture and ancient civilizations were somewhat foreign to him, they were nonetheless similar to Pérez's own folkloric tradition in terms of overall approach, therefore acting as an important form of connection. My impression is that this was even more the case with Chirino, whose studies of the ancient history and spiritual traditions of Africa overlap in many ways with Coleman's. The larger point here is that just as spirituality served as a driving force in the development of new modes of experimental and intercultural improvised music after midcentury, the shared idea that music functions in real time to effect spiritual transformation is what creates a basis for collaborative and improvisatory practice.

Another important area that some musicians spoke of in terms of diasporic connections was that of rhythmic sensibility. Coleman described a particular "approach to [rhythmic] space" that he hears in various music of Africa and of the African diaspora, though he was quick to clarify that he was not speaking about all music usually classified as "black." His examples ranged from the music of West Africa or AfroCuba de Matanzas to James Brown and John Coltrane. Pérez also used the term "space" *(espacio)* when

describing Coleman's approach to music, stating that this is what distinguished Coleman's project from the jazz he was more familiar with. Pérez felt that this sense of space was similar to the approach to rhythm in the Matanzas region specifically, as compared to that of Havana, and that this resonance was partly what gave him the "confidence" to overcome the other difficulties of working with Coleman's unusual metric structures.

Although such descriptions of rhythmic sensibility are highly subjective, I think they are worth thinking about here for a few reasons. For one, they point to a performative and improvisatory dimension of extreme importance to these musicians; namely, the nuances of rhythmic placement and articulation that make up a musician's (or group's) individual rhythmic "feel." While many factors go into establishing that feel, I think that one of the most important in this context is the use of subtle deviations in placement of rhythms against a regular pulse. Charles Keil has used the term "participatory discrepancies" to suggest that such intentional deviations against a pulse are central to the aesthetics of groove-based music (Keil and Feld, 96–108). This topic has also been explored in quantitative studies by members of the University of California, Berkeley's CNMAT research group on rhythm, including one by pianist Iyer, whose dissertation refers to this technique as " expressive microtiming."[19] Work by both Iyer and Jeff Bilmes suggests that within certain African diasporic musical traditions, musicians develop extremely fine-tuned control over rhythmic deviations from an isochronous pulse, and that these deviations are used in a conscious and expressive way.

Coleman's description of an African-based rhythmic "sensibility" includes not only explicitly groove-based music but also late Coltrane and other so-called free improvisation. In this sense he seems to be speaking about a broader phenomenon than these microtiming studies; at the same time, his comments are also more specific in that he, along with Pérez, seems to be referring less to the practice of microtiming generally than to a particular manifestation of it that he hears in certain players. Still, I think that these scientific studies suggest that the kind of rhythmic "sensibility" Coleman and Pérez are talking about here may indeed be a very real aesthetic resonance between the two groups, and that such studies warn us not to reduce claims like those of Coleman and Pérez to purely subjective imaginings based on racialized notions like "black rhythm." Equally important, the concept of microtiming also points to an important site for improvisation and interaction in this project. The continual negotiations between and within the two ensembles—particularly given the "complex relationship" between them rhythmically—demands a high level of sensitivity to not only macro- but microtiming. Improvisation at this level is more about what Iyer writes of as "a processual notion of communication, as a collective activity that harmonizes individuals," one that contrasts with a "telegraphic model of communication" based on "conveyance of literal, verbal meanings" (1998, 105).

This is not to say that the "telegraphic model" is not also at work in this project; rather, improvisation, agency, and intercultural contact exist not only in the more blatant, soloistic kinds of articulations here, but also on this processual and fine-tuned microlevel of groove. I think that this kind of understanding of improvisation and interaction helps explain, for example, Chirino's reactions to my questions about whether or not he had felt empowered with agency or a sense of his own "voice" in the project *(voz propia)*. Repeatedly, he emphasized his responsibility, as leader of AfroCuba, in maintaining the rhythmic integrity of the groove. He described this role as that of (1) preventing the overall ensemble's groove from falling apart, and (2) simultaneously maintaining AfroCuba's own particular *seal* along the way. Chirino, of course, improvises frequently in this music in the more soloistic and explicit sense of the term as a lead vocalist for AfroCuba. Yet this sensitivity to "expressive microtiming" and emergent models of group interaction is equally central to his conception of agency and music making.

Overall, then, I think we need a multileveled understanding of the role of improvisation in this project. In contrast to models of improvisation based on "freedom" from predetermined musical structures or traditions or on egalitarian social orders, improvisation here is linked closely to collaboration, from the most microlevel of groove to the larger levels where soloistic articulations, contrasting rhythmic cycles, and interrelated but distinct histories continually negotiate a complex coexistence.

Playing Philosophy

Over the last few decades, both academic scholars and improvisers themselves have published work that theorizes the impact of transnational cultural formations on contemporary music practice.[20] Yet a central point in this article is that music making can be another form of theorizing, a type of experimentalism that interrogates not only formal materials but also conceptions of culture.

In this sense, I see some parallels between this kind of music practice and some of the concerns emerging in cultural theory. In his landmark essay "New Ethnicities," for example, Stuart Hall describes a newly emerging (in 1989) cultural politics that "has to do with the awareness of the black experience as a *diaspora* experience," one whose relationship to the past and "to its different 'roots' is profound, but complex" (447). He suggests that

"there can . . . be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present" (448). This kind of complex relationship to the past and to one another—maintaining difference while simultaneously searching for a larger level of common ground—underlies the musical strategies I discussed in the previous section.

Critical to my previous discussions, though, is the question of how such ideas are embodied in actual methods of music making. Countless musicians throughout the world would quickly echo Hall's point about tradition and the "identities of the present." Yet respectfully considering musicians' own views on what music making means to them does not mean taking their interpretations at face value nor ignoring what they actually do. One idea driving this article, then, is that the approach to music and sound evidenced in this project reflects a particularly deliberate and self-conscious investigation (however incomplete and imperfect) into these intercultural questions, as compared to many contemporary "world music" collaborations in the popular sphere. Consider George Lipsitz's critique of David Byrne's *Rei Momo:*

> When Byrne sings lyrics that describe love as "a pizza in the rain" and then calls out to "my little wild thing," he has the great Cuban exile singer Celia Cruz answer him in Yoruba as she sings "yen yere cumbe." In traditional Cuban music, Yoruba lyrics resonate with collective memories of slavery and racism, they reinsert distinctly African identity back into collective national culture. But in Byrne's song, Cruz's Yoruba passage signifies only primitivism, exoticism, orientalism; she is an all-purpose "other" summoned up to symbolize Byrne's delight in musical difference on the west side of Manhattan. (60)

In contrast, the Yoruba (and Abakuá) text and music performed by AfroCuba de Matanzas is not only something Coleman has studied; it represents the prime reason for his being there in the first place. More important, though, methodology reflects intention. Whereas the multitracking environment of the studio and the musical conventions of "global pop" are adequate tools for Byrne, the kinds of improvisational processes I have been describing as part of this project come out of a more profoundly dialogic sensibility.

Using *Rei Momo* as a foil in this way does risk describing these projects in terms of oversimple "tropes of celebration" and "tropes of anxiety," two interrelated discourses that Steven Feld suggests have been central to how world music is "routed through the public sphere" in the late twentieth century ("Sweet Lullaby"). Yet rather than idealize the Coleman/AfroCuba collaboration as a utopic, transcendent communion, I simply suggest that its methods embody an especially keen attention to the complexities of negotiating cultural identity and difference.

In this way, collaborations like this one might help us move beyond bleak conclusions about the limited possibility for human agency and creativity within musical discourses grounded in global systems of commodification. Consider Veit Erlmann's suggestion that "the key principle of world music" is a Jamesonian sort of "pastiche": "I take pastiche and its central role in the postmodern global culture as an index of the rapid loss of referentiality and, thus, as broadly analogous to Baudrillard's idea of a 'culture of the simulacrum,' or Virilio's 'aesthetic of disappearance'" (482). To my ears, the collaborative models of improvisation in this project embody a different approach to heterogeneity and difference; rather than fall on either side of the "referentiality–post-referentiality" divide that Erlmann implies, they call this binary into question.

In this respect, I am reminded of Monson's more optimistic comment that "riffs, repetition and grooves—as multilayered, stratified, interactive, frames of musical, social and symbolic action—might be helpful in thinking through some of the more challenging issues in contemporary critical thinking" ("Riffs," 32). Yet "riffs, repetition and grooves" paints an extremely broad picture; Byrne's *Rei Momo* certainly riffs, repeats, and grooves as well. My focus here has therefore been on particular ways of riffing, repeating, and grooving, and on how these practices and the larger traditions they reference constitute a deliberate form of theorizing in itself, what Monson calls a "critical resource" (61) for scholars, and what Lateef refers to as "playing philosophy." Specifically, the musical approach to cultural identity and difference here brings to my mind what Hall defines as one of the challenges of contemporary "black cultural politics," which he describes as the act of discovering

> how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interest and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity. (444)

In this music, the multilayered rhythmic cycles, as well as the broader Afrocentric practices of heterogeneity that these cycles reference and embody, function as a kind of "boundary line" or framework for the negotiation of interrelated histories and identities. At the same time, like Hall's political boundary lines, these musical practices and "extramusical" stances are not fixed, not conceived as static musical styles, but are processes and strategies that can be applied in continually varying circumstances.

The term "politics" in Hall's passage brings us back to the previously cited ideas of Wong and Coltrane, who insisted on larger spiritual contexts for discussing the political dimensions of their work. One of the reasons I think the Coleman/AfroCuba project, as well as the larger creative music traditions it references, has particular relevance for contemporary cultural theorists is that many of these scholars also seem to be trying to carve out a broader notion of politics than the ones they inherited, broader in that its analytical scope moves beyond purely materialist paradigms. This is not to deny the urgent need to combat contemporary crises on concrete activist levels. Yet my point is that both contemporary cultural theorists and creative improvising musicians like these work within other understandings of what constitutes the political, out of a conviction that the challenges we face today also demand a transformation in how we understand ourselves and relate to one another.

Thus, while Erlmann may be right in his assessment of the global popular music he takes as his topic, I think the Coleman/AfroCuba collaboration points toward a different kind of "world music" happening at the margins of contemporary black music. One that is indebted to innovative African-American traditions while simultaneously a part of larger diasporic contexts. One that links sophisticated strategies of improvisation with collaborative, intercultural models in order to "work with and through difference." One whose conception of experimentation is grounded within a larger understanding of music as both spiritually transformative practice and as a form of philosophizing. And one that warrants—to borrow a phrase from improviser Pauline Oliveros—some "deep listening."

Notes

1. Many thanks to the musicians and dancers who spoke with me, all of whom were exceedingly generous with their time and ideas. These include Steve Coleman, Francisco Zamora Chirino, Yosvany Terry, Vijay Iyer, Laila Jenkins, and Ramon Garcia Pérez. Thanks also to the many others who offered important feedback, including Michele Rosewoman, George Lewis, Ingrid Monson, Nancy Guy, Nathaniel Mackey, Wadada Leo Smith, Kazadi Wa Mukuna, J. D. Parran, Jann Pasler, Anthony Davis, George Lipsitz, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, Dana Reason, Jason Stanyek, Anthony Burr, Shahrokh Yadegari, Jason Robinson and Alan Lechusza. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1999 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, the 2000 Conferencia Internacional de Cultura Africana y Afroamericana (Santiago, Cuba), and the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

2. M-Base was a network of musicians that emerged in Brooklyn in the 1980s and included Geri Allen, Robin Eubanks, Kevin Bruce Harris, Graham Haynes, Greg Osby, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, and Cassandra Wilson, among others. For more, see Iyer 1996.

3. IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordonation Acoustique/Musique) is a research institute in Paris founded by Pierre Boulez.

4. Santería is the term most often used outside Cuba to refer to Yoruba-based, syncretic religious practices in the Americas, notably in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The term "santería" was originally derogatory and although this has changed, most Cubans still refer to this religion as Regla de Ocha (The Rule of Orisha) or La Regla Lucumí (Lucumí refers to Yoruban cultural presence in Cuba generally). Also note that the term "folclórico" has a clearer meaning for most Cubans than does its English cognate; for a taxonomy of Afrocuban music by a well-known Cuban musicologist, see León 1991.

5. See Roberts, *Latin Tinge*, 24–99.

6. In a 1949 interview, Charlie Parker is reported to have said "Man, there's no boundary line to art" (Levin and Wilson [1949] 1994).

7. John Storm Roberts recently published one of the first books dedicated exclusively to this subject (1999).

8. This taxonomy in part follows that of Lewis (1996, reprinted in this volume). For more on the late 1950s and 1960s, see also Kofsky 1998, Jost 1974, Litweiler 1990, and Monson 1998; on the AACM, see Kelley 1997, Radano 1993, and the AACM website; on Asian-American jazz and improvised music, see Asai 1997, Jang 1985–88, Masaoka 2000, Wong 1997, as well as the Asianimprov website; on European improvisers, see Jost 1987; on the "downtown" improvisers scene, see Zorn 2000, Litweiler 1990, and Gann 1997; on M-Base, see Iyer 1996 as well as Coleman's M-Base website. Also, on Pan-Africanism see Weinstein 1992 and Lewis 1998, and on "intercultural free improvisation" (specifically Evan Parker), see Stanyek 1999.

9. During the 1990s, many other North American and European musicians have followed Rosewoman's lead by initiating projects that center around religious Afrocuban genres, typically Lucumí (Santería) batá drumming and chant. These include Jane Bunnett (Canada), Nikki Yeoh (UK), Mark Alban Lotz (Netherlands), Kevin Diehl (USA), and Coleman (USA).

10. For more on how discourses of spirituality were utilized by African-American musicians to intervene in the critical discourses surrounding their work, see Porter 2002, chapters 5 and 6, and Monson, "Oh Freedom."

11. Although this quote is from an unpublished conference paper (Hernandez-Reguant 2000), Hernandez-Reguant's forthcoming dissertation (2001) deals in more depth with recent developments in Cuban culture industries.

12. ". . . invadieron a los Estados Unidos"; ". . . en segundo plano, como un acompañamiento atras"; "como parte primordial"; "lo contrario del jazz que se utilizó en los Estados Unidos anteriormente, en esos años." All subsequent comments by Chirino, Iyer, Jenkins, Pérez and Terry are from the interviews cited at the end of this paper, unless otherwise noted. All translations are my own.

13. Although dance is a central aspect of Cuban folkloric traditions, its role in this collaboration is beyond the scope of this article, in part because the only commercially released work from this collaboration was an audio CD.

14. Iyer was not involved with the project in Cuba but did perform this music on subsequent tours.

15. "Buscando nuevas formas, nuevas sonoridades. Porque la cultura Africana es muy rica. Se ha investigado, se ha desenterrado bastante, pero todavía queda mucho por descubrir."

16. Matanzas, a major industrial and port city, is an important cultural center in Cuba, particularly for folkloric traditions.

17. "El concepto de la música de Steve es muy fundamentado. Está fundamentado en algo. No es el concepto aquel que surge sobre la nada. Entonces, eso es una cosa que pasa por supuesto con la cultura Cubana, y la música Afrocubana principalmente. Que todo . . . está en función de algo. Todo está representando una energía, representando un santo, representando a un orisha, a algo, en específico."

18. "Kemetic" refers to the ancient civilization of Kemet. Coleman's ideas here come out of his studies of ancient cultures and their mystical, scientific, and philosophical traditions, including but not limited to those of Africa. While this is a broad and relatively esoteric area, a good starting point is Schwaller De Lubicz (1998).

19. See Jeff Bilmes, Iyer, Wright, and Wessel; Jeff Bilmes; Iyer. Iyer wrote his dissertation on rhythm perception and embodied cognition while simultaneously working as a sideman for Coleman. The notion of the "temporal atom" or "tatum" used in many of these studies comes from Jeff Bilmes, whose earlier thesis utilized a quantitative, computer-based analysis of a performance by Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, another well-known Cuban folkloric ensemble. Researchers at CNMAT—particularly director David Wessel—have also explored these rhythmic concerns in intercultural collaborations using new performance-based computer technologies and improvisation. See the CNMAT website.

20. For some examples of recent academic scholarship, see Taylor; Monson; Lipsitz; Feld; Meintjes; Guilbault; Erlmann; Slobin; Goodwin and Gore; Tri-axium Writings (see Braxton 1985), and more recent writings by younger artists like Fred Ho, Miya Masaoka, and Vijay Iyer.

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PART THREE

SOCIAL PRACTICE AND IDENTITY