

## Free jazz

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A term applied to avant-garde jazz of the 1960s and more generally to experimental performance approaches that were employed before and after that decade. Free jazz is sometimes defined negatively, in terms of the conventional jazz features from which it may depart, including a reliance on tonal harmony, metrical rhythmic structure, sectional form, and standard jazz instrumentation, instrument timbres, techniques, and ensemble roles. This approach, however, glosses over the different ways in which individual musicians altered, extended, and broke down conventions, and it offers little insight into the music's underlying organization. Other definitions of free jazz describe a tradition that has always valued experimentation, collaboration, improvisation, and a spiritual dimension to music. Far from operating without structure, free jazz requires skill and communication to select appropriate constraints while developing both the content and the form of the music in the course of performance.



Ornette Coleman with Ed Blackwell, 1971. JazzSign/Lebrecht Music and Arts

In 1949 Lennie Tristano's sextet recorded "Intuition" and "Digression" as examples of group improvisation not based on a pre-arranged composition. In the 1950s Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy, Jackie McLean, Joe Harriott, Paul Bley, Max Roach, and Sun Ra produced work that can be considered precursors to or early examples of free jazz. However, it was Ornette Coleman's provocatively titled recordings of the late 1950s, including *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, *Change of the Century*, and *This Is our Music*, his quartet's lengthy engagement at the Five Spot nightclub in New York in 1959, and the release of his album *Free Jazz: a Collective Improvisation!* in 1961 that brought the most attention and controversy to this emerging practice.

In some respects Coleman's approach on *Free Jazz* followed jazz conventions of the period, using brief composed melodic material to separate improvised solos by members of the group over a complex yet regular pulse. However, the album unsettled listeners' expectations in a number of ways, notably in its instrumentation—a piano-less double quartet—its 37-minute length, and the many extended passages of high energy, dissonant group improvisation.

Throughout the 1960s free-jazz musicians explored new sonic possibilities and innovative approaches to composition and improvisation, while confronting entrenched and frequently racist assumptions about jazz practice and the role and value of jazz musicians in society. Cecil Taylor brought a prodigious compositional mind and piano technique to "The Unit," his ensemble which featured the saxophonist Jimmy Lyons and the percussionist Sunny Murray (who was later replaced by Andrew Cyrille). Albert Ayler, a tenor saxophonist with an enormous tone and expressive range, led various groups which featured Gary Peacock and Henry Grimes (bass), Murray and Ronald Shannon Jackson (drums), Charles Tyler and John Tchicai (saxophone), Roswell Rudd (trombone), and Don Cherry and Ayler's brother Donald (trumpet). In 1964 the trumpeter Bill Dixon organized the October Revolution in Jazz, a four-day event held at a small concert space on West 91st Street in New York, which featured around 75 avant-garde musicians, most of whom were not yet well known. The event succeeded in generating critical attention for the free jazz movement and in demonstrating that there was an audience willing to engage with the music in a formal arts environment far removed from the cafés, bars, and mainstream jazz clubs in Greenwich Village that had previously and sometimes reluctantly hosted it.

Dixon also founded the Jazz Composer's Guild, a short-lived and often strife-ridden collective run by musicians that paved the way for similar, longer-lasting associations such as the Black artists group in St. Louis, the Underground Musicians Association in Los Angeles, and the Association for the advancement of creative musicians in Chicago. In 1965 the saxophonist John Coltrane made a collaborative recording with a large ensemble, whose members included several free-jazz musicians from the younger generation, notably Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, Marion Brown, and Tchicai; the resulting album, *Ascension*, is often compared with Coleman's recording *Free Jazz*. Having established success in mainstream jazz, Coltrane's shift to the avant-garde lent considerable credibility to the burgeoning movement, inspired many mainstream musicians to adopt a more experimental stance, and helped to expand the socio-aesthetic-cum-spiritual terrain upon which African American musicians operated.

In the 1970s vacant warehouses, known as lofts, in Manhattan provided alternative performance spaces—famously, Studio Rivbea run by the saxophonist Sam Rivers—and free-jazz musicians increasingly took responsibility for presenting the music. Several musicians found academic jobs at universities and a few, including Anthony Braxton and George Lewis, won important awards and fellowships, such as those from the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations. On the whole, however, unlike such experimental composers as John Cage, free-jazz performers were never successful enough to define alternative sites of musical production or to gain institutional support for their work due largely to a set of associations that link African American music with entertainment, the discursive opposite of high culture.

European audiences, venues, and institutions were often more supportive, and many American free-jazz musicians chose either to move there or to tour there annually. As early as the mid-1960s, several notable European musicians, including Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, John Stevens, Peter Brötzman, and Willem Breuker, began exploring approaches that were inspired by, if not always beholden to, American free jazz.

Since the heady days of the 1960s and early 70s, many musicians have avoided the term free jazz for its potentially misleading connotations, favoring instead terms such as progressive, experimental, and creative, which tend to shed a more positive light on what is often extremely complex and highly composed music. Other artists developed labels connected with particular musical approaches, musicians, or locales, notably M-base (Macro-basic Array for Structured Extemporizations), a conceptual system and collective of musicians centered around Steve Coleman, and the Downtown scene, a loose collection of experimental composers and non-traditional venues in Lower Manhattan most commonly associated in jazz with the activities of John Zorn.

For many musicians, listeners, and critics, free jazz represents an important period in which jazz often went hand in hand with the broader socio-political concerns of African Americans; Frank Kofsky and Mark Gridley have discussed this idea with widely differing conclusions. The performance practices of free jazz also left an indelible mark on the contemporary musical landscape: dissonance, atonality, extended instrumental techniques, and noise have become part of the vocabularies of most contemporary musicians and listeners, and moments of open-ended collective improvisation can be heard in a wide variety of music, for example, in the work of the English rock band Radiohead. Free-form improvisation continues to play a role in contemporary European art music and the use of interactive electronics in live performance complicates ready-made distinctions between improvisation and composition, and even between performers, instruments, and environments.

While aspects of free jazz continue to percolate through a variety of musical practices, audiences for the music remain small, in part because devoted listeners are often exhilarated by precisely those same elements that alienate more mainstream audiences. Beyond any musical particulars, the lasting impact of the free-jazz revolution may be its legacy of artist-run cooperatives and its ideals of openness, self-determination, and community formation that have inspired and assisted countless creative musicians.

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