Freejazz & Other Insurrections

Reflections on Radical Listening

Richard Gilman-Opalsky

2009

> "Freejazz reaches back to what jazz was originally, rebelling against the ultra-sophisticated art form it has become."
>
> –Archie Shepp

I. From Regressive to Radical Listening

Freejazz, according to the great tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp, is a rebellion against the bourgeois world of "high art." It is a music that self-consciously identifies as a kind of sonic insurrection, both within and against music itself. It makes good sense to begin this article with a quote from Shepp.

It makes less sense to follow-up with a quote from the elitist Frankfurt School philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno's understanding of "serious" art maps out dangerously close to what most snobbish connoisseurs of Western "high culture" take to be serious. And moreover, Adorno derided jazz in particular, with a vitriol that often applied thinly veiled racist caricatures to the musicians.

Jazz Car: Camden Maine
— photo: Walker Lane

Still, the honest among us know all too well that Adorno got more than a few things right, and that his vicious critique of the culture industry could only be categorically rejected to the detriment of any good critique of capitalism. With regard to commercial music, Adorno said:

> "The consciousness of the mass of listeners is adequate to fetishized music. It listens according to formula, and indeed debasement itself would not be possible if resistance ensued, if the listeners still had the capacity to make demands beyond the limits of what was supplied…There is actually a neurotic mechanism of stupidity in listening, too; the arrogantly ignorant rejection of everything unfamiliar is its sure sign. Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have once been served." 1

This first appeared in 1938, published in Germany, where Adorno witnessed first-hand many of the horrifying effects of radio broadcasts and propaganda, utilized by the Nazis, on the German population.

It makes sense, in this historical context, why Adorno was so inclined to issue an indictment of the regressive impact of prepackaged, formulaic, short-form music that was broadcast widely through a relatively new mechanism of mass media. And, to be fair to Adorno, he was much less concerned with music and art criticism than he was with the manipulation of political culture–something that, he feared, could prepare a population for the most murderous programs states could think up.

Adorno was wrong about many things, but he was right that capitalism acculturates hostility toward the unfamiliar. Capitalists benefit from a field of consumers who crave standardized and mass-produced products, including songs and movie plots that can be predicted before being heard or seen in full. Most of us have had the experience, when watching a movie with a friend, of congratulating ourselves for calling the outcome before it plays out. Making good predictions is rewarding, and the opposite, unpredictability, can be frustrating. Adorno understood that the standardization of cultural products was a dangerous inversion, a reversal of the logic of "good art." "Good," or "serious art," as Adorno called it, ought to be confrontational and provocative, and should never be so easy that it can be taken in passively.

The listener who does not actively listen is not much of a listener at all, and music that does not need to be actively listened to is rote and incidental. But, instead of demanding to hear something that we do not already or immediately enjoy, instead of demanding to hear something provocative and difficult, we tend to demand more of what we have already come to like; we may even experience revulsion in an encounter with the unfamiliar.

Such a comportment, Adorno concludes, is that of stupidity. It is not a good thing for art or politics when we stubbornly reject anything that threatens to undermine our pre-existing tastes.

But when it comes to radical politics, Adorno can do no better than provide us with a launching off point. He was relatively uninterested in radical politics, which surprised enough activist students that they disrupted his lectures in protest during the final years of his academic career. 2 In any case, I am not particularly interested in Adorno here, but a question related to his critique of "regressive listening." I am interested in the question of "radical listening"

We know how to think and to speak in radical terms. That is, we know how to think about a better world that looks little like the one we live in; we know how to imagine "the good" as something incompatible with "the good" of capitalist-consumer society. We can articulate an idea of the best of all possible worlds that is the very antithesis to the existing political-economic structures of the world we now have. That does not mean that we agree with each other, or that we agree on (or even know) how to create a new world in actual fact. Still, to think and speak beyond the bounds of what is, and to act against what is, comprises much of the political space of the periphery.

But, I wonder, do we know how to listen in radical terms? What does it mean to listen radically? And does it even matter?

I begin to answer these questions by asserting that most of the formats for expressing radical ideas are formally unchallenging. Our art and music come to us in tepid forms, easy to appropriate. Many of the punk bands, for example, that taught me so much about social and political issues, that seemed well beyond capitalist cooptation, have seen their format appropriated and played back on Conan O'Brien, as background music in hip clothing stores, in fitness clubs, and TV commercials. We have discovered that they were marketable after all, fully compatible with commercialization.

One might rebut that anything can be commercialized, but I disagree. When it comes to music, for example, we listen in very conventional ways, standardized across genres regardless of differences in content.

Conventional listening is linear, we listen for beginnings and ends, we anticipate a succession of parts and changes, most of which repeat for the pleasure of familiarity and predictability. By contrast, radical listening, is spatial, not linear. It deprives the listener of having a succession of parts and changes to count on, and insists on being unfamiliar at every turn. Radical listening compels us to think in more expansive terms, to open and to raise questions rather than to settle them at once.

As to the more difficult (and more important) question of whether or not radical listening matters, I argue that it does matter, although not as much as I might like it to. Simply put, radical listening can help to distribute ideas beyond the narrow boundaries of a text and its reading public, but it holds no certain promise, no guarantees for social and political transformation.

In general, political art is a desperate act, which tries and often fails to transform anyone or anything. Like the best political documentaries, or music, or theater, or even books, it can be very good but not very effective, especially with audiences who more-or-less begin where the works conclude. Nevertheless, I maintain that we stand to benefit from the practice of taking in and processing works that are uncomfortable and unsettling, difficult to process.

II. Freejazz as a Case to Consider

Adorno's critique of commercial music was one of the things that drove me to deeply appreciate freejazz music. And I have always found it surprising that he so loathed the jazz musician, who was, already in the 1930s, fully involved in unpredictable flights of improvisation and the active destabilizing of all linear rhythms. I could never help but wonder what Adorno would have said about freejazz as a particular movement in the history of jazz. 3

The jazz that Adorno writes about was clearly a different variety, as he refers to it as "usual commercial jazz" which was an easily ignorable accompaniment for conversation and dancing. 4 Freejazz was an attack on this "usual commercial jazz."

Freejazz in America began as a movement in the 1950s. The music culminated in international underground movements in the 1960s, and then passed through various phases and reconfigurations throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and still continues today. Sometimes, the music I'm calling "freejazz" also goes by the names "avant-garde jazz," "jazz improvisation," "out jazz," or "new music."

Freejazz is an insurrection in the world of sound, and demands what I call "radical listening." It is not freejazz in particular that we necessarily need. But what we do need are other insurrections on visual-sonic terrains, insurrections that could learn something from this particular movement.

I am interested in thinking about, speaking about, and participating in, social movements that intervene in repressive political cultures that support capitalism uncritically.

For reasons I have discussed in other works, 5 I am most inspired and influenced by the Zapatistas, the Situationists, and in general, theories that focus more on the power of the public sphere than on the power of the state (the state has been wholly felicitous with the worst things in human history, from unfettered capitalism, to war and genocide, to the atrocities recently witnessed in full horror in Israel's last attack on Gaza).

In all of my work, it has always seemed to me that political art is of great importance, that artists can say things with more urgency and impact than a text, and this is truer today than ever before. We live in an increasingly visual world, where text is on the decline, and visual-sonic provocations can captivate in novel ways, calling on us to listen to and see things differently. This general assumption overlaps with what is best in Debord's work and the EZLN's approaches, and it is what I was looking for in the uprisings that began in Greece (and in solidarity around the world) in December 2008 and January 2009.

On the one hand, freejazz is a footnote to this reflection. On the other hand, it is the perfect illustration. I grew up in the '70s and '80s, and it was music, not my material existence, that first politicized me. Before the lessons of great dead authors, I learned about justice, inequality, and political action from CRASS, The Dead Kennedys, The Proletariat, Minutemen, Die Kreuzen, Husker Du, and in the late '80s and early '90s, from bands like Born Against, Rorschach, and the DIY punk scene of that time.

I played in a group that released a number of agitprop-inspired records on rather "big-little" grassroots labels like Mountain, Ebullition, and the sometime publisher of anarchist books, CrimethInc. In the 1990s, I began to focus increasingly on freejazz drumming. Improvisation felt to me like the most vital and living way to approach music, to engage with other players with attentive listening and creative, sensible, responses, in an artistic simulation of radical democracy.

The ideals of freedom, communication, and provocation appeared clearly in the forefront of freejazz and improvised music, and for these reasons I have been drawn to it for the past 16 years.

The approach, in freejazz, has always been shaped by many different traditions and attitudes. There is no single ideological framework that binds the players, not even, say, if we are only talking about players in New York in the 1960s. Some were Black Nationalists, some were openly expressing their religious spirituality, seeing themselves as conduits for the Holy Spirit, some were communists, some were anarchists, and some believed that they were

simply playing the music of their time, to accompany the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, or the Black Panther Party.

To be sure, to accept everything that the music claimed to represent would lead to a kind of schizophrenia. For me, it was not the religious claims of Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, or Charles Gayle, or the Black Nationalist claims of Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) that drew me to the music. Rather, the political claims and revolutionary spirit of people like Clifford Thornton, The Revolutionary Ensemble, Archie Shepp, Paul Rutherford, and the antagonistic nature of the sound itself, the radically collective action of the music, appealed to me.

But if we view the music in its historical context, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, I think there is something the music does claim in common. Freejazz is generally understood as an emancipatory project of some kind, either immediately liberating in the moment of performance, for both players and listeners, or liberating in a prefigurative sense, pointing toward a possible future liberation.

The music does not merely say that it is "about liberation" (as in lyrics or liner notes), but actually enacts a kind of liberation in its performance. Freedom always sounds like a good idea, though not to jailers and states, but the sound of freedom itself is not so easy to endure. There is an easy (even if strained) analogy in the prisoner who has lived in a cell for a decade, for whom the idea of freedom is a beacon, but the experience of being freed takes some time to handle.

Regarding the music, drummer Milford Graves said of free-jazz: "Some people talk of freedom but they're playing what they think they should play. You can't go into freedom without conditioning yourself. If you've been living a certain way for twenty years and then all of a sudden you come out and say you want to be free, it doesn't work because you're fighting yourself…" 6

Pioneer bebop jazz drummer, Max Roach, who died in 2007, was not strictly a freejazz player, but performed with many freejazz pioneers such as Archie Shepp (on overtly revolutionary records like The Long March and Force), with saxophonist Anthony Braxton, and also with pianist Cecil Taylor. Roach once said about his experience playing with Thelonious Monk, "Monk encouraged me to emancipate the drums from their subservient role as timekeepers."

For Roach, if the music was inspired by broader emancipatory struggles in the world, could it not also be purged of the repetitive and oppressive limitations of the division of labor among musicians and instruments, and rote memorization in playing compositions?

Freejazz was the outgrowth of a number of things already taking place in jazz music and in society, culture, and politics in the 50s and 60s. And some of the things that were "in the air" were a growing spirit of freedom, disillusionment with the U.S. in light of the imperialist war in Vietnam, a burgeoning "race"/class consciousness, the stifling rhetoric of the Cold War, and from all of this, an impetus for something revolutionary (even if defined multifariously).

So, when Roach talks about "emancipating the drums from their subservient role," you can hear in that statement one of the ways that the spirit of freedom was transposed into the music.

Improvisation has always been a big part of jazz music. Even in Louis Armstrong's music, his wild solos were most surprising when they were improvised on the spot demonstrating his ability to run through and create loosely associated melodies that were "ready at hand," and not read off sheet music verbatim.

Decade after decade, throughout the 20th century, improvisation took on different and increasingly central roles in the music. Until ultimately, a constellation of radical musicians including Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Bill Dixon, Arthur Doyle, Noah Howard, Frank Wright, and many others, made group improvisation the focus of their music.

In addition to the cultural and political context, the music also represented a defiant response to what was in the 50s and 60s a flourishing music industry. It was a severe economic risk for the original coterie of artists, most of who lived at the boundaries of impoverishment for much of their lives.

Most of these musicians could have chosen to play standards and straight ahead compositions in relatively well-paid working bands, because it is worth remembering that this was before rock music made playing jazz for a living a virtual impossibility in the 1970s. So, the decision in the 1960s to play music for which there was no commercial market, to play music that would be banned from jazz clubs and reviewed with intemperate vitriol in the press, would often launch these musicians into dire financial straits, which few ever escaped.

While quite a bit can be said about the history of the music, little can be said to describe it, or the experience of listening.

Freejazz challenges the logic of the commercialization of music. Much of it is long-form improvisation, meaning a single piece of music could be 30 minutes or well over an hour. This fact alone made the music incompatible with commercial radio play. Rhythms are jagged, or smooth and multidirectional, and there are few melodies that march along in a straightforward manner, in a line that could measure term years and the corporate workday.

On first exposure, I have often heard it asked if (or declared that) the music is atonal. But it is actually the complete opposite of atonal. Inasmuch as atonal means the absence of tonality, freejazz is actually better described as "extra-tonal," for it offers more tones and at the same time than we are used to hearing–hence the feeling of chaos. This is much like the common misinterpretation of anarchism as chaotic (a misinterpretation that, sadly, even some anarchists make) which only reflects an inability to identify different forms of organic and nonhierarchical order.

We should not regard as "chaotic" everything that is not a hierarchical bureaucracy. There are different forms of order.

The form of this music is also its critique. You will know what I mean if/when you hear it. Perhaps Cecil Taylor contextualized the music best: "Anybody's music is made up of a lot of things that are not musical. Music is an attitude, a group of symbols of a way of life, whether you're conscious of it or not–and of course, it naturally reflects the social and economic and educational attitudes of the players." 7

But let's not soften the point. There is something furious happening in this music. It is not a mild variation on a theme, but rather, a blistering attack on the repetition of familiar melody in repetitive song structures. After practice at listening, after listening more radically, one discovers an alternative conception of the tonal and the melodic, and finds that there is something more beautiful than scary about the freedom of the sounds. Full of noises like chirps, screams, squeaks, smashing sounds, and an overwhelming persistence to elude all prediction.

It was once said of Albert Ayler's group that "[t]heir sound was so different, so rare and raw, like screaming the word 'FUCK' in Saint Patrick's Cathedral on a crowded Easter Sunday…others shouted at the musicians to shut up. I sat shocked, stoned and amazed by what I was witnessing. Their music was unlike anything that I had heard before." 8

It is worth asking: How often do we say that about the music that we hear?

III. Other Insurrections

It is difficult not to think of anarchism when thinking of this music. Freejazz is a subversion of every tepid liberal turn in the history of music, making the music of the 1969 Woodstock Festival (which happened simultaneous with the apex of the American freejazz movement) sound easy and tame.

I often think of anarchism as the good conscience of the Left, as the expression of the utmost logical developments of the best ideas and arguments made by leftists. Anarchism is extreme, just as its critics have never tired of charging, but the anarchist reply has been sharp to point out that the world is full of extremities of injustice, repression, and terror, so any viable politics must also be extreme in response.

I see a kind of analog for this in freejazz. Freejazz is a music that takes some of the best ideas in radical art and extends them to their logical conclusions, and it represents a kind of good conscience of radical art such that artists, dealing either in sound or images, might do well to measure their work against the benchmarks of this music. But if we are concerned with the radical transformation of the world, let us depart from freejazz, taking it as a kind of launching off point for further insurrections.

We have our radical texts, and we have our radical theater (from The Living Theater to The International Anarchist Theater Festival, both recently covered in the pages of *FE*). We have had radical music too, from CRASS, Poison Girls, D.I.R.T., to more recent projects today. But where is the challenge of radical listening, the challenge of bringing the unsettling discomfort of the unfamiliar into conflict with the static status quo? Where is this taking place, inside and beyond our communities of choice? Of course, such locations exist, but they are not so easy to find.

When ideas, and even sights and sounds, move from the periphery to the center, the radical must reconstitute itself as something else. This is true because to not do so is to adopt a position of relative complicity, a position incompatible with any anarchist point of view. The notion that any given state of affairs can be transformed for the better is the impetus for projects for social and political change.

The periphery puts forth ideas and arguments of various kinds that are antagonistic to the center. This is not so much a philosophical point as it is a historical one–the center changes over time, but a good conscience is always reconstituting itself in the margins, on the periphery, imagining how to work toward the next transformation.

Our radical texts outweigh our visual and sonic ones. While the latter surely exist, they are only challenging and disruptive in passing moments, like saturnalias that rise and fall with a festival or a performance or a Temporary Autonomous Zone. The problem, of course, is that our opponent enjoys the stature of permanence (even if not the reality of actually being permanent), and our opponent does not exist in fleeting moments, but at every moment, all of the time. Any countervailing force to the current order must be as constant as capitalism itself.

We need new insurrections of visual-sonic works to help our ideas into visibility. One can think here of the Zapatistas who only said on January 1, 1994 what the indigenous people of Mexico have been saying for over 70 years of PRI-rule. The difference was not their struggle for liberation, but the poetry, the masks, and the theatrical uprising. These aesthetic qualities helped to get those words out of the borders of Chiapas, out into the world beyond.

Freejazz was an attack on the center from the periphery. Over 40 years later, that's still what it is. Freejazz has not effectively subverted the center, for it is still an outlier art form in the margins of music that aims to challenge the ways we listen. Freejazz still aims to get us listening in radical, participatory ways, to reject passive reception and the fetish of familiar repetition.

Yet, in some of the major cities of the world, freejazz is finding more and more appreciation among bourgeois connoisseurs, as if Adorno had lived to learn to love it. The music is becoming a kind of gallery event in cities like New York and Chicago, and in posh venues overseas. This is a good thing for the aging and impoverished musicians who may not have to die poor and hated like so many of their brothers and sisters. Appreciation is a good thing for those who've been mostly maligned for bringing beauty into an often-ugly world.

However, growing appreciation of the music is not wholly motivated by anarchist or revolutionary sensibilities. We have to be honest about that. And, this appreciation is hard to find outside of big cities. But even if freejazz makes no revolutionary promises, the music does embody radical sensibilities, it does come out of explicitly radical traditions, and it does challenge us to listen beyond the existing boundaries of "good taste." So, even if freejazz itself is not the answer, it does point out the best direction.

Right now, other insurrections are what we need most. As Debord and the Situationists knew, capitalism increasingly utilizes the visual-sonic terrains of communication, and these terrains captivate and provoke with the greatest immediacy. New insurrectionary art must begin on the periphery, but must do better than freejazz has done to break out of the margins of a hermetically sealed subculture and disrupt the state of affairs it so abhors.

What we may take from freejazz for now is a call to all artists and musicians to give us something that we cannot bear! Make us listen and see differently. The periphery will forever be reinhabited, so let us not get too comfortable here. Let us leave these margins for the sake of antagonisms that can "abolish the present state of affairs" and bring us closer to a collectively construed liberation.

Endnotes

1. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," pp. 285 and 290.

2. *Adorno: A Biography*, Stefan-Muller Doohm.

3. Actually, Adorno's own piano playing, which has been recorded, has much in common with freejazz.

4. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," p. 288.

5. See *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lexington, 2008), and "Guy Debord and Ideology Materialized: Reconsidering Situationist Praxis" (*Theory in Action*, Volume 1, Number 4, October 2008).

6. Wilmer, Valerie, *As Serious As Your Life*, p. 249.
7. Ibid., 45.
8. Ibid., 95.

Freejazz: Recommended Listening, Then & Now

(1) Ornette Coleman: Freejazz: A Collective Improvisation (1960)
(2) Albert Ayler: New York Eye and Ear Control (1964)
(3) John Coltrane: Ascension (1965)
(4) Roscoe Mitchell: Sound (1966)
(5) Peter Brotzmann: For Adolphe Sax, Fuck De Boere (1967–1970)
(6) Clifford Thornton: Freedom and Unity, The Panther And The Lash (1967, 1970)
(7) Kaoru Abe: Jazz Bed (1971)
(8) Frank Wright: Center of the World, Vol. 1, Unity (1972, 1974)
(9) Arthur Doyle: Alabama Feeling (1978)
(10) Archie Shepp & Max Roach: The Long March (1979)
(11) Sunny Murray & Sabir Mateen: We Are Not At The Opera (1998)
(12) Ivo Perelman: Seeds, Vison and Counterpoint (1998)
(13) Paul Flaherty: The Hated Music, It's Magnificent But It Isn't War (2000, 2003)
(14) John Gruntfest: The Greatest Little Big Band (2008)

fifth estate

Richard Gilman-Opalsky
Freejazz & Other Insurrections
Reflections on Radical Listening
2009

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/381-summer-fall-2009/freejazz-insurrections
Fifth Estate #381, Summer-Fall 2009

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net