

Improvisation as a Tool for Investigating Reality

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Improvisation is a tool for investigating reality. What is the reality we are investigating? Let me approach that question through a couple of stories. When I was writing *Free Play*, I was visiting a dear friend of mine, Michael Stulbarg, who was a pulmonologist in San Francisco. He was what we used to call a left-brain person, very logical and scientific. I asked him, as a doctor, what do improvisation and creativity mean to you? Without hesitation, he answered: it means actually seeing the patient who is in front of you, rather than a textbook case or a diagnosis you've been taught. Any doctor who is in practice, and who really *practices* their practice, knows that each person is absolutely individual and cannot be entirely categorized except in terms of their own situation. To clearly see that uniqueness, to see another human being, is a remarkable thing. And that ability is at the core of improvisation. Many people have the idea that improvisation means acting wild and crazy or behaving without pattern or procedure. They tend to associate improvisation with randomness. Of course everyone in this room knows that is the opposite of how improvising works. Our experience as improvisers is one of direct encounter with what is in front of our noses, whatever that may be: our instrument, our partners when we're improvising together, the unconscious, the room in which we are playing, the people with whom we are playing, and the audience for and with whom we are playing. In improvisation, we get as close as we possibly can to the data of experience.

Improvisation is similar, in my mind, to the 19th Century scientific practice of natural history, which was Gregory Bateson's home territory. In natural history, you aren't compounding a carefully controlled situation as in experimental science or fully scored music; you're looking at what you find in nature and trying to deal with it, to react to it and understand it. In natural history one approaches a complex system whose multifarious interactions are impossible to specify in advance and you come to that encounter with no fixed expectations but with a disciplined capacity to observe and react, a capacity which has been honed by experience.

I often play with partners in chamber improvisation. In our concerts, there is no discussion, no planning of any kind before we go on stage – other than preparing the equipment, tuning up, and the agreement to listen to each other completely and produce out of that a coherent and coordinated music. A friend of mine who runs a children's theater in Charlottesville came to one of our concerts. My friend said that as she

was watching us on stage, she had never seen adults listen to each other so intently. Out of the pure and complete act of listening and nothing else, we can produce coordinated, organized music; which is nevertheless from that time and place and from that moment.

I teach at chamber music festivals where people normally come together to play Mozart, Shostakovich, and so forth. We do improv workshops where groups, usually quartets, concertize together, after perhaps three days of rehearsal. One of the things that is remarkable in these people's experience – people who are classically trained, who have had that lifetime experience of having the music stand as a barrier between them and the audience, between them and their fellow players – is the power that they experience from being there *with* an audience with nothing in between. I'm speaking not just of a music stand as a physical barrier, but also the virtual music stand of a memorized score. To have nothing at all between you and your fellow players, between you and your audience, is such a remarkable experience. From that experience of encountering each other arises what I call the natural history data of music, which encompasses all of that observation, all of that feeling, all of the millions of nerve impulses that fire every second as you interact with other people in a context of time and place, just as I experienced a few minutes ago when I was playing here. Those drums had been stacked up right under the loudspeaker and were rattling during the low frequency tones of the last piece – so I had to find some way of encountering those drums. In every case, we are able to handle these encounters with immediate reality that are so fast and so minutely organized because we allow our nervous system to operate at its own very considerable speed – unimpeded by scripts and plans.

At one of these chamber music workshops, the faculty would evaluate the participants' playing, not for the purpose of giving them grades, but for the purpose of placing them with compatible people and playable scores the following year. The people with basic skills would be given Mozart and Haydn, the people with more developed skills would get the Brahms and the early 20th Century material, and the most advanced skills would be given the brand new contemporary scores, which are often complex-looking, difficult to follow, and require a lot of experience to play. There was one fellow who was a fantastic improviser. He was a violinist with excellent control of his instrument, he could make all kinds of weird, whispery, wonderful 21st Century sounds, microtonal, sliding, jumping and bouncing, doing all the amazing things that you can do with a violin. He was minutely responsive to his partners. I thought he was fantastic. Then to my great surprise, we go into the faculty meeting, and all the other faculty members gave this guy what you might call a C grade, saying he was only advanced enough to play Haydn and Mozart, because what they were looking at were his reading skills. And indeed, his reading skills were at that level. What I got to experience through his improvisations were his *musical* skills, which is a whole different ball of wax. It's fascinating to be able to encounter real musicianship, real skill. We've all met people who are naïve musicians, not well trained, that can get incredible sounds out of instruments, out of their voices. Where do we place that immeasurable talent on the scale of musicianship?

The other day I was in the grocery store and ran in to a little girl I know, Vlera, who is two years old. Her parents are from Kosovo, so she's half in an English-speaking en-

vironment and half in an Albanian-speaking environment. When she talks to strangers, she can only say one word, which is “Nah.” We had the most wonderful conversation in “Nah”: *Nahhh* in innumerable tones and timings and colors of expression, *Nah! Nah? Na... h* passed back and forth between the two of us for many minutes. I realized that with a one-word vocabulary, *naaaaaah*, you can come up with an infinite variety of expression. And she could do it because she was completely, uninhibitedly wired into her nervous system and to her surroundings, her feelings of shyness and fear and boldness and playfulness and flight and fight. All these inflections and moods and explorations of relationship were swirling around inside that single syllable which we tossed back and forth to each other.

I sometimes teach a workshop called “Gibberish, the Universal Language.” When I work with chamber musicians, we often spend the first hour doing gibberish pieces – put the instrument down, put your years of training and skill away; let’s just make noise together and learn to listen to each other completely. Listening is everything. Pauline Oliveros, for decades, has been talking about *deep listening* as the essence of the work that we do. Sometimes I am invited to theater or poetry departments where people do not have instrumental skills and they want me to do musical things with the participants, so I do this gibberish work. I’ve found some fascinating things working with trained improv actors who are already good improvisers. These might be professional, marvelous actors, who are used to doing theater improv but don’t work with sound. For many people, the idea of theater improv is associated with comedy; we usually think of Second City theater in Chicago, TheatreSports, and so forth. There is a reason for that; if somebody on stage performs something intense or serious or makes your hair stand up on end or that brings tears to your eyes, the performer doesn’t see that. If the performer does something that makes you laugh, the performer gets that immediate feedback and there is a kind of Skinnerian learning going on – you are funny and the audience laughs and you respond by being funny some more. So you stay in the groove of comedy. Now in classical music, you’re not allowed to laugh during the performance, so such an interactive experience does not happen. If laughing were allowed, then classical musicians would be funnier too. The interesting thing that I discovered when I had actors working in gibberish, rather than in words, was that they could still be funny, but in addition they suddenly had a wide range of other and more serious emotions available to them. I can’t quite tell you why this is. It is quite a strange thing, but they would do these pieces with three or four words like *chuchaki* and *jajéméné*, and slap their body parts and bang the floor and they were able to get into very profound riffs. While you can never say what their piece was about in a literal sense, the expression of primal feelings about life and death and love and loss and basic human relationships and tragedy became the focus. Such things are not always covered in the work of improv actors. Somehow nonsense and gibberish gives them permission to encounter and work with those feelings. Because it is so unlabeled, they are able to go anywhere with it.

Conversely, improv musicians find themselves empowered to be funny – a territory which is often forbidden in the high-culture atmosphere of both the classical and the avant-garde.

Language labels things for us. Jean Piaget wrote: “Intelligence organizes the world by organizing itself.” The problem with language is that it transforms our experience of the world into *things*. Because of the incredible convenience of language, we hypnotize ourselves into believing the reality of linguistic symbols, especially nouns. Gregory Bateson, following the inspiration of Anatol Holt, used to say that he wanted to get a bumper sticker that would say, “Stamp out Nouns.” Nouns, representing so-called persons, places, things and ideas, are a marvelous convenience that allow us to get up and to move our mouth parts at each other and communicate about items of experience which are not immediately present, but they do not represent anything except for a very provisional and temporary kind of reality. These musical instruments: they are made of wood, the wood came from forests, and the forests came from particular ecological conditions, from the rain, from the earth. The characteristics of the wood are related to who cut the wood down, and in what way and how was it cured before it was made into an instrument. And eventually in the fullness of time, these instruments will turn into debris of some sort. In Buddhism, they call this the “emptiness of inherent existence.” When Westerners hear that term, “emptiness,” they tend to get alarmed, because they think that emptiness means nihilism, as if things don’t exist. The operative word in that phrase is “inherent.” Look at this red guitar cable connecting my red electric violin to the amplifier in the podium over there: like the violin, it was made by people; the plastic and metal and materials came from some place; the whole history of consciousness of all the people whose inventiveness and whose labor on an assembly line factory in China and everything else that went into the making of that guitar cord is *here*. So we’re looking at an immense complex of interrelated activity, which is only temporarily present in the form of that “thing.” Obviously, if I step over that cable in the wrong way, I can trip over it – it is eminently real – emptiness is not the same as nihilism. Thich Nhat Hanh substitutes for the word *emptiness* a word which is more precisely communicative: *interbeing*. The wood of the instrument, the trees, the people who made it, the people who cultivated the trees, the people who work in the factories who made the strings and everything else, all of those inter-are with the violin.

There’s a wonderful 3rd Century text from China called *Hsi K’ang’s Poetical Essay on the Lute*. It is a book about how to play the *ch’in*, the Chinese lute. He spends about half of his text on tree cultivation and ecology and what goes on in the forest and how to choose the trees and that sort of thing. For him, the proper study of a musician is ecology; the ecology of the forest, but also the social ecology, the intellectual ecology. When our instrument has now been built and we strum it, there is the ecology of our everyday sensorium. As we improvise in both our art and our daily life, there are tunes that are rattling around in our heads, from the commercial we heard on the radio this morning, or some piece of music that we have always loved, or some ethnic or cultural patterns and feelings that are present in our lives, all of those things coexist with the present moment of our real-time artistic creation, and they are available for us to draw upon.

Emptiness means emptiness of *inherent* existence – the guitar cord or the improvisation doesn’t exist by itself, but it coexists, it inter-is, with absolutely everything in the universe. And because ‘absolutely everything in the universe’ is information, we can

stand up with nothing up our sleeves, no plans and no stated intentions, and improvise music with each other. Such experience is possible because we have an infinite amount of information to draw upon that is already present and already with us, from the four and a half billion years of organic evolution of our bodies to the evolution of all of our cultures, and all of our friends' cultures and everything that we have come in contact with.

Now we go back to our initial proposition of improvisation as a tool for investigating reality, and ask what is this reality that is being investigated. The answer lies in the concept of interbeing. Interbeing, then, is the opposite of thingness. Some of you have probably read the work of Christopher Small, who does this wonderful deconstruction of the concert hall environment. He plays with the whole notion of how all these works have become *works*. How the process of the composer's mind and the process of the playing of the instrument and the process of its reception of the audience have turned these things into works as if they were solid objects and then the history of art or of music is the study of those objects as though they had thingness. We can sit in a concert hall and enjoy hearing Beethoven. But we can also sit in that concert hall and imagine, Beethoven himself walking into that sanctimonious environment, scowling and growling at the conservative straitjacket within which his music had been placed. He was a man who was prone to have temper tantrums so you can imagine what he would have said. It might not be quite as bad as what Jesus might say if he could come back and saw what is being said and done in his name, but it would have still been pretty bad!

Here is another entry point into the reality that we investigate with improv. I recently met an extraordinary man named Colin Lee. He is a music therapist in Toronto, originally from England. He has written book called *Music at the Edge*. It's the chronicle of his music therapy journey with an AIDS patient who was also a skilled pianist. I had not known very much about the world of music therapy. My wife, a hospice and palliative care doctor, once described in hilarious terms a couple of people who come to hospice units and play the harp for the patients. It sounds a little horrifying; if I were very ill, would I really want harp music with all of its sappy cultural connotations in Western civilization? But then I encountered the work of Colin Lee, and I found out what music therapy is about. What he does is improvisation with patients. He was mostly working in hospice/palliative care, with a lot AIDS and cancer patients, particularly back in the days when a diagnosis of AIDS meant death in a year or two. He was working with people who were in states of great terror – knowing that they were going to die soon. He would improvise together with them. He had some patients who could play musical instruments and many others that couldn't; they banged on drums, thumpers and shakers and percussion instruments, the piano keyboard. He improvised with them, allowed the music to reflect incredible pain, anxiety, peacefulness, or reconciliation. The whole gamut of extreme emotions were made available through this musical conversation which could take place at a speed and with an articulateness that no one could have with a verbal therapist, because language is simply too slow and clumsy. The amount of information that gets passed back and forth in each second of music is simply beyond what ordinary language can do. For this reason, we can use music as a tool to investigate the emotional reality of people in the greatest distress. That reality, even

though it is hard to talk about, is something that you come face to face with, quite intimately through hearing the sounds the patient plays. Since many of the patients look very bad, or very odd, if we were presented with video recordings we would be affected by the visual appearances and not listen as clearly to the emotional content that is being expressed. When we have the audio-only content of a CD, we have the opportunity to get much more intimate with the patients' feelings. Not seeing the room in which the improvisations were recorded, not seeing the patients, we can be closer to them, just as radio is such an intimate medium of communication. Colin played me a tape of an improv that he did with a seven year old Down's Syndrome boy who had never spoken an articulate word, and at the end of the session of playing the piano with Colin, said, "Bye." Some of the people in these situations look funny, look bad – if you see them you get a particular impression of who they are, but if you hear the sound they make, then you get very a different impression. You are going directly into a relationship with them, and experiencing their thoughts and their emotions in real time.

What's magical is that everyone in this room participates in this kind of work. This is why it's so exciting for me to be here. There are so many styles and so many ways of doing things represented here by the work that all of you do, and every single one of those styles participates in that immediacy and that immense complexity of real-time improvisation and real time information that's transported to us by sound waves that cannot come in any other way.

There is a South African word, *Ubuntu*, which is much the same thing as interbeing. Desmond Tutu brought it into currency in the West and it is the opposite of Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I am." *Ubuntu* means, "I have my being through your having your being." *Ubuntu* is the territory that we arrive at as we embark on our improvisational explorations.

And now let's open it up for discussion ...

QUESTION: I've been thinking about some musicians that I play with. We do a lot of improvisation and a couple of them weren't very nice people and so I had to stop playing with them because I started to absorb their issues and I couldn't do that any more. The interbeing thing is really important. When you're improvising, to me, it's more important to improvise with people you have a good relationship with, rather than just doing it to make money. Which is what I was doing and I had to stop doing it, and go back to my day job. Now I'm playing with people I love to play with and it's a much more fulfilling experience because of that communication. The interrelationship between the musicians is important to me.

S. N. : You bring up an interesting point. What happens when you improvising with people that you don't like? There are a lot of dimensions to it. First of all for you, as an improvisational musician who is in it for certain reasons, there is the territory that you choose to stake out for the work that you're doing. Clearly you are not doing music therapy. You are playing music to have fun and to make art. There are going to be people that you don't like, or whose egos get in the way. There might be people that you don't like personally, but with whom you might meld musically extremely well. There

may be people who are your best friends and the music you play together may not be very interesting, even if they are skilled musicians on their own. Somebody in a position like Colin Lee, a music therapist, is not working in an artistic context and is not concerned with the issue of whether he likes the person or even gets along. The issue is to create some kind of a meeting, and to create some kind of a breakthrough with whoever that person may be. There are a lot of different contexts to play with. The interesting thing is that you choose your field and you work within that, but then you also find ways of expanding that field. And improv is one of the great methodologies for expanding that field. Because, in fact, there may be all kinds of people that you can't talk with very well, but whom you can improvise with.

Now the core issue of improvising together is mutual support. Del Close was a guru of the Chicago improvisational comedy world. He said that your job as an improviser is not to come up with brilliant lines. Your job as an improviser is to make your partners shitty line sound good. That's not always easy. People who come into this kind of work have had years of training and experience and have a lot of skills; and with skill there often comes the desire to show off. This is true for many of you who are academics also, who have acquired skills of a different kind, and once again, with academic skill, there's a natural desire to show off. All of you have been to academic conferences where there's a table there and someone is up here speaking and you're the next one in line, and you can't hear what that person is saying because you're already thinking of your clever comeback. To step back and listen is a very hard thing for everyone. I have friends who do a project called "City at Peace," which started in inner cities of the United States. It's theatre work for teenagers in troubled, difficult urban areas; and they have now spread to Africa, to Israel-Palestine, they've spread to all kinds of places where there are horrible conflicts going on. They are bringing kids together to do theatre and interact as artists and performers, who otherwise might have killed each other out on the streets. What kind of an encounter is that? They've had some real success making interesting pieces, making art, and at the same time getting people to talk to each other who would otherwise be incapable of talking to each other.

I spoke earlier about language and the problem with nouns. One of the problems of language is that a particular word might mean one thing to me and something quite different to you, and a little bit different to her, and a little bit different to somebody else. You can use words to describe thoughts or feelings and inadvertently get people angry at what you're saying before you complete even a single sentence. This is certainly going to be true if you're working across the Israeli-Palestinian border or something like that. Some of these other means of communication that sidestep nouns with all their accretion with emotion and meaning and association and so on are very interesting things to look at. What happens when you encounter a person with whom you've improvised, and whom you don't particularly like, and you sit down together and do something else that is in a different language? It brings up a lot of issues, it's very interesting. The whole issue of interpersonal relations and likes and dislikes is very powerful.

QUESTION: You mentioned the role of the audience in improvisational comedy. As a person who has played some very difficult improvisational music for let's say negligible audiences, I've come to respect the need to play to the space rather than to the audience. If there's an audience there, fine; maybe the jokes will get funnier as time goes on, maybe not. But the space, particularly for a timbre-oriented player such as myself, the space is always precious, always something new and always presents a new realm of possibilities for the instrument you're engaged with and the musicians you are engaging with as well. The audience you can't rely on so much, in my area ... since our country went bananas [in 2001], since it's lost its freaking mind. Adventurous experiences seem to be less favored than single-chord punk rock or covers. Perhaps in that time in this country there is a need to embrace that space whatever it is and go into whatever experience you're about to have with an appreciation for whatever is given to you.

S. N. : You've brought up a lot of very interesting things. I will say that the advantage to playing to minuscule audiences is that it is easier for you as a performer to break down the performer-audience barrier and make the audience part of your artistic activity. If there are 10 people in the audience and you can see them all up close and they can see you up close – the boundary of the stage disappears. As weird and far out as your music may be to the hypothetical masses, with those 10 people, you have a much better chance of visually engaging them, of physically engaging them, of getting close to them, of involving them in the sound, of making them part of the sound, of playing with them. You can see someone's breath, you can see their minute body rhythms, and you can play with that. Perhaps you've brought in 10 people rather than 2,000, but those 10 people that you brought in, you have the opportunity to bring them all the way in. And to connect in a personal way that you'd never have with a bigger audience. And part of that has to do with being attentive to their cues and attentive to what's going on – and a good hypnotist and a good therapist and people like that, they can watch the rise and fall of somebody's chest and they can adjust the rhythm of what they're doing to the rhythm of that rise and fall, and find themselves in a co-inhabited space with the audience so that you become one.

And as you say, becoming one with the space of any size is a fascinating thing. I can stand here and I sound one way, and I can step back to this other end of the stage and I sound another way, and I can hear the differences in the vibrations as they come back to me. Just stepping between the cord and these two electrical outlets, I felt a rise of resonance in the sound that comes back to me from the dome above room. I can use the room as an instrument if I pay attention ... or finding the rattle of that drum as the speaker sound came out and having to alter what I did so that I was playing with the drum. And of course, in the pauses between what we have been saying this morning, we have heard the sound of the air conditioning. John Cage gave us that gift in our culture, of being able to be attentive to the sound of the air conditioning and fully embracing it as a part of what we're doing here. What we create and the context of creation are inseparable.

QUESTION: A question about your instrumentation? Do you improvise also with an acoustic violin?

S. N. : Yes, it's right over there.

2nd QUESTION: What moved you to move to the electronic violin from the acoustic violin. Did you feel that your research with reality with the acoustic violin was at the end, so you need another tool?

S. N. : If you put it that way, my research with reality with the acoustic violin has barely begun. Forgive the double entendre, but I've barely scratched the surface. But I'm also interested in as many different sounds as I can get. The fact is that I have limited time available in my life ... I wish I could learn all instruments. For example, ages ago, I was so wowed by the sounds of Pablo Casals playing those cello suites, perhaps it would have been wonderful to be a cellist too, but every time I picked up a cello I realized that I'm just not going to have time to learn to do that in this lifetime. But I then discovered that I can take an electric violin and put octave strings on it and get down in that baritone range where I like to hear sounds; this is wonderful and it's within the range of my competence as a violinist. I've always been fascinated by electronic music. Even though I've done a fair amount of purely electronic music that I compose in the computer, there's always a little bit of something lacking because of the lack of richness or unpredictability or variability in purely electronic sounds. Around 1975, I was living in Berkeley and I got my first electric violin and I walked into a rock & roll store where there are all these pedals available for rock guitarists, and I just went wild, because you can start plugging things in and modifying your sound and getting all of these weird, spooky, space-age, gritty sounds that you can get with electronics – yet still the sound that is coming into that wire is coming from a bow rubbing against a string, so it has all the variability, unpredictability and multidimensionality that you get working with real substances in the real world and then transforming that sound. That, for me, is the fascination of working with the electric violin. I regard the electric and acoustic instruments as two parallel paths to interesting sound. I can't say that one is an evolution out of the other.

3rd QUESTION: And to the practical use of the electronic tools: why didn't you choose to use a pedal control for the effects you used today?

S. N. : I came here in a small airplane yesterday evening. Since I don't have a road crew, I can take this effects box and stick it in my suitcase, and I've got the sounds. When I'm working at home in my studio and recording, I've got pedal controls and other tricks, but this is just in order not to be carrying a hundred pounds of luggage.

4th QUESTION: Someone before talked about the use of space in an improvisation context. Were you annoyed when the snare drums started vibrating when you played your first note, or did you try to incorporate that sound inside your musical performance?

S. N. : No, I was not annoyed and I did the best that I could to incorporate it into my performance. And perhaps the performance became more interesting through how I tried to play with the rattling of the snare drum. John Cage said to me one time, that when he was younger (he lived in an apartment in the teens of Manhattan and there was a lot of traffic noise) that when he was younger he was fascinated by the traffic

noises and the sirens and all that kind of sound; and he said, now that I'm old, I'm interested in sounds like the refrigerator going on and off.

QUESTION: As a young improviser, I'm finding that one of the things that I'm interested in musically is how our life experiences and our backgrounds influence our personal styles and how we approach music and how we approach musical situations. I'm wondering if you can share some of your thoughts about that and how the things you've experienced in the past affect how you approach a certain musical situation?

S. N. : In a way I'd throw it back to you and simply say, YES. Your life, your experience, your personality, your body, all come into play. With an instrument like the violin, two people with two different body types are going to approach that thing in a completely different way and get very different sounds out of it, just from that. And then you factor in everybody's individual emotional makeup and everybody's intellectual makeup and all the stuff that you've heard. Just think of as a musician of what you've heard. I have a concept of what I call the two bins of music: if you're a professional musician or a student, you've studied a lot of pieces and your knowledge of each piece or each style of music that you've studied goes into a bin of memory that is available to you. But then it also simultaneously goes into another bin which is your general idea of what music is. Into that bin goes John Cage's air conditioner, goes the muzak that I heard in the airport yesterday, everything that you've heard in movies, everything that you've heard on the radio, commercials, every sound that you've ever heard goes in. Every sound that you've disliked, you can hear something and dislike it intensely and that dislike goes into your formation of who you are as a musician. One of your most powerful tools as an improviser is your personal sense of boredom. What interests you, what bores you? It's going to be somewhat different than what bores everyone else in the room. Boredom is a powerful indicator of complex factors that may be hard to articulate consciously. to you of how you feel about things and what things are resonating with you and why. My goal in improv is to play a coherent music that is perceived as satisfying that elusive balance of structure and spontaneity, without having made any prior agreements. Feelings of boredom, fascination, frustration, humor, are powerful guides as we weave our way through the time of performance.

I was at an anthropology conference in Montreal a few months ago and I was sitting in a Persian restaurant having dinner. At the table behind me there were a couple of guys talking, who were clearly part of the conference. They were talking about the dynamics between stability and flow. That seemed like the essence of musical art, so I pricked up my ears. When I had eavesdropped further on their conversation, I realized that they were preparing a talk about European Union economic policy – not music. I realized when I heard that, that what we are concerned about as artists is a universal concern of people in any field. When you're improvising a piece, how do you balance spontaneity and structure? The balance is not something you can dial up on a meter, it has to take place from your belly, from your integrated self. The issue of structure vs. spontaneity or chaos vs. order, or allowing random elements into composed work, to what extent do I allow myself to be pulled together by the temporary tonal center that's given by the overtones of the sound I just played vs. allowing myself to be pulled by the

sound of the timbre of the air conditioning – all these considerations get integrated automatically in your improvisation, with little or no conscious thought. Their particular mixture is individual to you. And your sense of boredom is very important, as you continuously monitor your feelings: ‘now let’s change this, change that ... oh this is interesting, let’s hold back the desire to change it too fast.’ The one thing that I do find after years of doing this is that my personal sense of boredom as a meter of how quickly things need to change or stay the same is a little bit different from most of the audiences that I play for, in that theirs is a little bit slower. I may have some motif that’s come to me and I’ve played it three times and then feel that it’s time to move on – the audience, however, is just getting used to it. If you let it go on twice as long as you think you want it to go on, it will imprint itself in their memories, and that’s how you get the audience to go home whistling the tune of an improv piece that has never existed before and will never exist again. Your improv is, as they say in chemistry, titration, how much of this and how much of that, and every factor of your life filters into that titration.

QUESTION: Could you say more about the concept of interbeing? I was not entirely clear about it.

S. N. : Well, you are typing there on an Apple computer. It’s in your lap and you can feel it with your legs and feel it with your hands. It’s a solid object and it’s real, obviously. But also there’s some of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak in that computer, right? And there is some semi-slave labor in contemporary Chinese factories that are subcontracted by Apple to manufacture the computer, so those people are part of that computer – and their parents and their friends and all their lives and their ancestors. The plastic of which the computer is made came from someplace. It came from petrochemicals. Petrochemicals are basically the decayed remains of dinosaurs and the forests in which the dinosaurs lived. Even though that’s not a wooden object, there are still forests within that plastic Apple computer. You’re using a piece of software, which was written by someone. It was probably written by a team of people who had arguments about how to do it right. Those arguments are embedded in your computer. The more you look at that computer, the less of a discrete *thing* it is and the more it feels like a process of interbeing with the whole of existence. In a variety of Buddhist disciplines, you investigate the self through meditation. I tend to do Zen meditation where you just sit still and breath and allow yourself to be. In the Tibetan Gelukpa tradition, they tend to be more analytical. As you sit there, you may probe, what is the self, is it a little homunculus inside my head? Well, no. Is it my brain? No. Is it this or that? You start ticking off the possibilities and wiping them out, and eventually you get to the end of the universe and you realize that the self is empty of inherent existence. In the same way, we are analyzing that Apple computer on your lap. The metals came from somewhere, somebody mined the metals, and in the future it will probably end up on a junk heap. And what’s going to happen after that? So interbeing means that the more you contemplate the Apple computer that you are typing on now, the more it tends to merge or inter-be with infinitely many beings, places, things, natural phenomena and so forth. If you want to study at a university and want to study physics, chemistry, history, mathe-

matics, music, history of consciousness, everything else, you could study all of them simply by investigating that Apple computer. That is what I mean by interbeing.

QUESTION: I was wondering about what you were saying about therapy and how music is on a higher level than words because it goes straight to the patient as expressing themselves completely. I was thinking, somebody who doesn't have much experience with music, or even other musicians, if I am improvising with other people who don't have a sense of connection with the music so much as their thinking, that maybe they have a lot of self-consciousness and maybe this patient who is performing with the therapist is thinking about how they're sounding with this egg shaker, or maybe they're just trying to sound like a recording they've heard or something. Or even a musician who's improvising and is trying to subscribe to certain rules or notions. How do you create an improvisational space or community with those people, how do you make that connection?

S. N. : Sometimes I get paid to come to a university and do an improv program with them, and I realize, here are some wonderful musicians who are interacting and playing, and I'm just standing here in the corner and listening and smiling and enjoying what I'm hearing. I think, well, isn't it strange that I'm getting paid all this money to stand here and listen to wonderful music and keep my mouth shut! Today I'm in a lecture context where my job is to babble at you or babble with you, but when I'm teaching improv, my main job is to keep my damn mouth shut. What I'm actually doing is giving people permission to do what they already know how to do, but have not yet given themselves credit for. If a person begins, it's okay to begin rattling that egg shaker, worrying: am I making a good sound, or is this as good as what I've heard on records or does it match what I've heard on records? That's a perfectly okay beginning place. But if you stand back and give people permission to be with that egg shaker, then it will shift.

One concept that I work with in improv teaching is circles of support. This whole room is a circle of support for all the thoughts we are having here this morning. And if we had a group of people improvising here, we're a circle of support for them. Everything that happens within that circle is accepted.

Sometimes I'll be working with a group and often they'll play an improv piece and we'll have a little discussion and we'll play another one and have a little discussion and somebody will say, 'well, that piece that they did three pieces ago, was rather sour and not very good and didn't progress,' and various qualities that we might ascribe to not-so-good music. And the student then asks, 'why didn't you stop them?' In classical music we are used to conductors doing rehearsal, who keep waving their arms to stop you if they hear something that they don't like. My friend Al Wunder, in Australia, who is a wonderful improv movement and theater guru, wrote an essay a few years ago about positive feedback – not cybernetic positive feedback, which means runaway cycles, but rather the practice of saying only positive things to people learning the arts. I have found that this is the most marvelous technique. Al Wunder reminds us what it is like to be with a one year old child, who today is taking his first step across this floor. What do we all do? Everybody claps, 'Isn't that wonderful,' everybody is there *with* the

kid. Now the kid is, in fact, falling down and picking himself up and falling down again; yet we do not say (as we constantly do in teaching music) ‘That was pretty good, but next time, if you hold your back up a little bit straighter and lift your knees higher, you can walk even better!’ We don’t say that because we have faith that the feedback systems are going to work. In the improv workshop, when people play a piece that didn’t sound very good, we all heard that it didn’t sound very good, so what’s the point of saying it? They’ve had a chance to try something. They’ve had a chance to not-sound-good. They’ve had a chance to be in a circle of people who are all *with* them when it was not sounding very good, and *that* is the learning experience. You don’t need to add on to that by stopping them and criticizing. You can be in the midst of either an improv or a pre-composed piece, and it can start going off track and you hear it going off track and you correct yourself. All of us drive cars here. Feedback is the way we live. Feedback enables me to stand up. My blood temperature is constantly wiggling above and below 98.6° F. – it regulates itself – and when I stand up, the muscles on the two sides of my body are constantly wiggling around in dynamic feedback in order to keep me standing up. When you drive, you’re wiggling the steering wheel right and left all the time, right? So you’re always going a little bit off course when you’re driving. Your nervous system is aware that you’re off course and it turns a little bit right and left to correct it, and it’s not slapping you and saying, ‘Oh, you bad hand, you turned a little too far to the left!’ We don’t punish ourselves that way. We just keep correcting and drive. In teaching, you stand back and give permission for things to happen. I regard what I do in teaching as taking a cork out of the bottle, I take it out, and stand back, and watch it flow. Things will happen, people will learn, people will evolve. Improvisation is a stochastic process like learning or like evolution. It keeps correcting itself. It keeps getting deeper. You use the word *higher* – I might use the word *deeper*. It keeps getting deeper and deeper if you allow the work to happen.

QUESTION: Tomorrow I will draw a line between single cell organisms and Apple computers, so if you like, please come! Another thing about the space and organs [of perception] and how improvised music works. I would like to share with you my experience. It happened 20 years ago, in a very distant place in Poland on the border between USSR and Poland. We popped into the little town, ‘we’ I mean free cooperation band of 16 free jazz musicians in Poland, and we experienced the place which was completely strange to us. People who were drunk, who were dressed gray, all in Wellingtons, in the same type of hats. And we were wondering, ‘Jesus, it’s 12 o’clock and we are to play in four hours or so, will they kill us or so?’ We didn’t know. Finally we walked into the venue, and the venue was a small hall in a fireman’s house; this was the only venue available in the town so, not very comfortable, the artistic space that you mentioned was not very promising and we were wondering who will listen to our music? Of course, the same guys; the difference was that they were more drunk at the time. So we were ready for execution, but we more or less fearfully we started to play. For example the opening tune was Max Reinhardt manifesto, “What is Art,” spoken in English, which was another cause of war. So we finally finished the gig and surprisingly enough, a miracle happened. All the guys, Wellingtons, dressed gray, same type of hats, they

went through some catharsis, they said, “People we don’t know what is this music, but it moved us deeply. We live here, hopeless lives, we don’t know what to do. Please stay with us, please play some more music. ” They didn’t want to let us go. They wanted to hold our bus. “No, no, you can’t go now!” They presented us some vodka and we got drowsy (I don’t promote it!). So the basic communion occurred, and the sense of fulfilling our artistic, and not only our artistic duty, we went back to the hotel. This is about the space and the artwork.

Another thing about this is improvising and playing with people we like and we feel to be fine. This story is about the same band. Freak Operation, 16-piece, young, hungry jazzmen from Poland. We were at Jazz Festival in Bratslav, jazz and opera festival. It was 2am and the band was completely in anarchy. We never ever had any band leader or someone. We were completely independent beings. We were even organized on the level of improvisation. When we went on stage there was a disagreement in the band. Which tunes should we play? We had two drum sets in the band and two bass players, a lot of instruments. Half of the band decided that they would play one tune, and the other half decided that they would play another. We couldn’t agree, and after five minutes of quarrel, we started to play, half of the band one tune and then the other half the other tune. I had the biggest problem, playing keyboards, and had the biggest problem. But I can’t forget the eyes of the audience. The conflict was the heart of something interesting that happened.

S. N. : The last part of your conversation reminded me of Charles Ives’ string quartet that he titles, “String quartet for four men who converse, discuss, argue (politics), fight, shake hands, shut up, then walk up the mountainside to view the firmament. ” Pieces of art can be built; incredible things can be built from conflict. They can be built on uncertainty; they can be built on fear. That’s the great thing about this kind of work, it doesn’t have to be nice; it doesn’t have to be known. But if you are using your capacity to listen and if you are using the innate structuring ability that’s built into you as a 4.5 billion year old living organism, then you can use fear, conflict, difficulty, unknowability as the basis for doing incredible things, and as you said, at least within a limited sphere changing people’s lives. If you’re playing to that ten person audience, you can still have an effect on the world that is completely unknowable. You have no idea how far that effect might go. And that’s what we’re here for today.

Thank you!

Books to look for:

Lee, Colin, *Music at the Edge: The music therapy experiences of a musician with AIDS*,
Routledge, 1996.

Wunder, Al, *The Wonder of Improvisation*, WP, Ascot Victoria, Australia, 2006.

Thanks to Samantha Lane for transcribing the recording of this talk