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Free Jazz and the Freedom of a Christian

J. D. Buhl

FREEDOM IS SOMETHING WITH WHICH A CHRISTIAN SHOULD BE VERY FAMILIAR. In Christ, we have been liberated from conformity to this world, the oppression of powers and principalities, and enslavement to guilt, self-absorption, and self-loathing. We have been freed from servitude so that we are free to serve others. Our model, the one to whom we look for an example of fully realized humanity, “was the freest person ever to walk this earth.”

In the final chapter of *Start Loving: The Miracle of Forgiving*, Colleen Townsend Evans wrote of the six ways in which Jesus was free. Jesus was free to be himself (“he insisted on fulfilling his real identity”), free to love others (“unencumbered with undue concern for the self”), free to express his emotions (“he could love and let people know it”), free to risk (“secure in the love of his Father”), free to serve (“free to be vulnerable”), and free to live fully—to love God and enjoy him forever (116–118).

Sin and guilt separate us from God, Evans wrote; Jesus brings us back. Once we accept being forgiven and Christ lives in us, this freedom is ours. So, I’ve always wondered why free jazz—that ongoing attempt at total self-expression that leaves chord sequences, time signatures, and accepted harmonic relations behind in search of individual freedom—is not hugely popular with Christians.

Much like the Jesus movement in the Jewish milieu of the Roman Empire, free jazz caused friction and fractured relationships. It was seen not as a natural progression but as a transgression against all progress. Its purveyors were heard as “wrong” in both conception and execution.

By the late 1950s, jazz considered itself synonymous with freedom. With its roots in personal and creative emancipation, jazz freed itself from the melodic, structural, rhythmic, and harmonic norms of music before and around it. Jazz improvisation was the freest, most individualistic form of self-expression ever to delight the ears and move the body. When the great Duke Ellington was approached by combustible bassist Charles Mingus, his idea of a few old heads making a “Free” record to shame the upstarts met with a swift reply: “Let’s not take music back that far, Charles. Why not make a modern record?”

Free players such as Ornette Coleman thought they *were* modern, the most modern, really, with a drive to create beyond what they had been given. What *Down Beat*’s John Litweiler calls *freedom with a capital F* was a response to hearing tonal possibilities beyond the expected and therefore feeling called to embody music that was not being played. Ordinarily, soloists would create their statements within the chord changes of a particular tune, improvising from inside compositional perimeters. In a free jazz performance, writes Scott Yanow, “after playing a quick theme, the soloist does not have to follow any progression or structure and can go in any unpredictable direction” (xiii).

Unpredictability is something we tend *not* to invite into our lives; we associate it with randomness. Yanow continues, however, that “the success of a free jazz performance can be measured by the musicianship and imagination of the performers, how colorful the music is and whether it seems logical or merely random.”

Skill, imagination, color, logic; these are the things that make our Christian lives convincing to others. The world is attracted to the Christ *in* us, not the Christ we talk about. Living the gospel imaginatively, and not within the confines of

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culture, brings Christ to others in our actions. Making Christian living colorful and rich with possibility is what Acts and the epistles have already set in motion. The need here is not for winning arguments about the existence of God but for a quality of life—what Paul referred to as “maturity in thinking.”

Pianist Thelonious Monk, a very strange cat himself, found free jazz offensive. It’s “bad,” he said. “Jazz must first tell a story that anyone can understand.” In *The Freedom Principle*, Litweiler presents alto saxophonist Coleman—free jazz’s most notorious exponent—as undermining our love of story. Christians are story people. Ours is a saving story, an interactive narrative, which explains and explodes existence. Our faith story comes in the form of writings. Although our faith is in a savior and not a book, still the book is indispensable to our faith. Our personal faith stories carry great meaning insofar as they mirror this form. In Coleman’s music of the late 1950s and early 1960s, “as the faint, lingering shadow of chorus structures disappears, classic narrative form (Lester Young’s ‘a solo should tell a story’) becomes irrelevant.” Litweiler believes Coleman implicitly tells the listener that “music with a beginning, middle, and end imposes the structure of fiction on the passage of life” (39).



For some, this imposition makes life possible. In *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller writes that while taking a college course in literature, it struck him that the elements of story—setting, conflict, climax, and resolution—paralleled his understanding of Christian spirituality. He saw that they were not the result of theoretical work but of humans using “the tools of reality to create elements of story.” “The heart responds to conflict because there is some great conflict in the universe with which we are interacting.” Accordingly, if climax is the point where a decision determines the end of the story, Christianity must put such a decision before the human heart. Resolution—good or bad—would follow. “Our decisions,” he concludes, “[are] instrumental to the way our story [turns] out” (31–33).

In Coleman’s world, music is music and story is story, they need not be analogous. Vast change is the only constant. Coleman solos “make clear that uncertainty is the content of life, and even things that we take for certainties are ever altering shape and character.” Coleman by turns “fears or embraces this ambiguity; but he constantly faces it, and by his example, he condemns those who seek resolution or finality as timid” (Litweiler 39). Litweiler could have been describing Martin Luther.

Our attachment to story does not always serve us well. In a desire to read scripture as “the story of God,” we can reduce conflicts, downplay climaxes, ignore resolutions, and “play the changes”—solo from safely within the perimeters of accepted aesthetic standards. We desire greater compatibility than there is between an earlier, complete text (the Old Testament) and an ongoing new one (the New Testament). We want them to be *equal*. Beginning with Stephen, however, Jesus’ followers died because they were not equal. God had done something in Christ that made old old and new new.

Jesus shows up in the story of the Jewish people and declares everything you know is wrong. Ornette Coleman opens at the Five Spot in 1959 and tells jazz people everything you know is wrong. Free jazz is the sound of taking Jesus seriously. When he launches into one of his “I know you’ve heard... but I say” routines, we are to go with what he says, not what we have heard; they are not equal. Though David could praise the Lord for girding him to annihilate his enemies, Jesus eliminated the category of “Enemy.” As David went on to claim that the Lord “rewarded me according to *my* righteousness, according to the cleanness of *my* hands,” Jesus lets us know we have no righteousness of our own. Our hands are hopelessly dirty. No, they are not equal.

“The theme you play at the start of a number is the territory,” Coleman said, “and what comes after, which may have

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very little to do with it, is the adventure” (Ward 413). Jesus is the adventure—a very *passionate* adventure. Passion is not the same as romance. We are comfortable there, floating through its predictable highs and lows. Romance plays the theme, makes pretty the territory. Passion goes deeper. Even bebop, the daring reaction to swing that gave birth to free jazz, was ultimately a romantic movement. Litweiler writes of its “rich, abundant, neurotic emotionality” (89). Passion hones skill, imagination, color, and logic.

Still, Charlie Haden, bassist at the Five Spot, hears all great musicians as free musicians. “Even though they were improvising on a chord structure, they were playing so free and so deeply... I call it with your *life* involved” (Ward 417). How liberating to hear Haden sound like the Apostle Paul, when speaking of “risking your life... being able—*wanting*—to give your life for what you’re doing.” The decision is between romance and passion. Can we play so freely and deeply as to give our lives?

GARY GIDDINS SAW ME COMING. HE WROTE in *Jazz: A History of America’s Music*, “the avant-garde has been treated as a metaphor rather than as music by proponents and enemies alike” (Ward 360). “The avant-garde” is Giddins’s preferred term for what I have called free jazz—and I do wish my reader to experience it as music. I believe the propulsive passion and world-denying power experienced at the vanguard provide a most appropriate soundtrack for faith.

Paul considered the Christian life a strenuous one; following Jesus was not for wimps or whiners. So it is not surprising that athletes were his favorite analogy. Had the phonograph been around, he could just as easily have used drummers.

“Elvin Jones was a mighty, mighty man,” I wrote in a poem for young people, “he could play those drums like nobody can.” His style was like,

A circle of sound
encompassing the kit...
It’s in your smile, it’s in your stance
it’s that dance you dance when you don’t know you’re dancin’
It shimmers like shale in the sun
splitting into thin layers
each of them our skin
so we simmer like cymbals whenever we’re close
it rattles and clatters and shivers your toes
light spreads out every time we meet
It’s like the song says:
“Alla God’s children got drums on their feet”

It sure felt that way. Jones’s work in John Coltrane’s “classic quartet” (1960–1965) seemed to do all it could with freedom, then enter “Free” for more possibilities, until a new rhythm of life was available. This was a heavy but joyous sound, using large cymbals and bass thumps, weighty accents, an asymmetric, polyrhythmic movement. His playing was not for keeping things on track, but a means of exploration: Jones did not delineate space but create it.

“Athletes exercise self-control in all things,” Paul reminds us. Likewise drummers, no matter how cacophonous it sounds. “May integrity and uprightness preserve me,” implores David in Psalm 25, “for I wait for you.” That is the feeling of a great Elvin Jones performance.

Jones often engaged in an intense, song-defining dialogue with Coltrane. Each recording feels as though these two have something to work out, and no end will come until they have exhausted all possibilities—for the moment. After a break, the matter is picked up again and examined from another perspective, found to possess meaning and application beyond what they previously imagined. Like Jesus’ Gospel discussions, this is a dialogue meant for full involvement. Theirs is not music for objective appreciation any more than Jesus’ announcement of the “good news” was a noteworthy event.

How exciting it would be for words like “dexterity” and “interplay” to describe our Christian witness. John Litweiler points out that, originally, Coltrane’s own emphasis on the downbeat freed Jones from establishing metric divisions. Eventually, he was able to solo in ways that left behind a song’s tempo and meter altogether, often running “three separate,

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simultaneous rhythms” to construct his own unique presence within a performance (95). By 1961, “with his great dexterity and instantaneous command of multirhythms, jazz percussion interplay reached its outer limits” (96). The only thing left to do after Jones, he writes, was for a drummer to abandon timekeeping altogether. This Sunny Murray would do.

In 1967 Amiri Baraka (back when he was Leroi Jones) wrote of the physicality of Sunny Murray’s drumming, his “body-ness.” What Jones called “the New Black Music” was about freedom, energy, and strength; real sweat, real funk, and the natural sounds of a body at work were not charming exoticisms or something to be imitated by technology. They were the essence of method and style. Jones saw that “what you say and how you say it are indissolubly connected.... How *is* What. Form is the structure of content. Right form is perfect expression of content” (124).

Is not the perfect expression of content what John had in mind when he urges the “little children” to love, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action”? How *is* What. There is a “body-ness” to love, a physicality that does not shy away from sweat, funk, or real work. Some free jazz musicians thought traditional improvisers—no matter the beauty and ability in their creations—loved not in truth and action. They had begun to mistake complacency for freedom.

These young, often untrained players, surrounded by the sounds of revolution, wanted to see what jazz would sound like if you kicked its foundations down. Even the “cool” involvement which jazz offered was suspect. The commoditization of jazz that Dizzy Gillespie had met with a smile was no joke for the avant-garde.

Referring to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” Eldridge Cleaver observed in 1968 that Ginsberg’s money-monster “Moloch” could have wished for nothing more “than to have its disaffected victims withdraw into safe, passive, apolitical little non-participatory islands.”

If all the unemployed had followed the lead of the beatniks, Moloch would gladly have legalized the use of euphoric drugs and marijuana, passed out free jazz albums and sleeping bags, to all those willing to sign affidavits promising to remain “beat.” (72)

Graham Nash sang to rebellious white youth as they came into the 1970s, “Though we live in the air I’m not sure that we’re free.” He saw the high wire act he was a part of as a rejection even of balance, never mind gravity. Elsewhere in “Man in the Mirror” (original title, “Tightrope Song”) Nash reminds the rebels, “Two and two make four, they never make five.” This appeal to the laws of mathematics, a call for respect for *something*, mirrors the threat so many jazz critics felt in free jazz.

These are the elements of today’s confusion of two things, “living in the air” and freedom. The “freedom” offered us by modern technology, for instance—the freedom of the iPod, the freedom of the GPS—is all just living in the air (what our friend in Ecclesiastes would call “chasing after wind”). The “freedom” one finds in car commercials and men’s magazines is that of the Freedom Merchants. The same merchants who sell you the freedom of war sell you the freedom of escape from the heartbreaking tyranny of war. The same merchants who sell you the freedom of free-market retirement security sell you the means of escaping the insecurity such “freedom” breeds.

Our Jesus of the ever-popular temple scene is not a man who would tell you freedom is for sale. He was overturning the tables of vendors and bankers and souvenir sellers who provided mediation for a price, inhibiting those in need of receiving God’s gift of existential freedom—no purchase necessary. This gesture, according to Robert Funk, may have “broken the back of patience for authorities concerned with the orderly conduct of business.” It was too much for them (as it is often too much for us) to accept Jesus’ view that “every person had immediate, unbrokered access to God’s presence, God’s love, God’s forgiveness” (203). God’s presence, love, and forgiveness equal freedom.

I have come to think of free jazz as America’s existentialism. Every person has immediate, unbrokered access to the music. The 1960s rebels addressed by Cleaver and Nash confused getting high with being high. This is something free jazz musicians never did but that we often do. Christianity could once have been America’s existentialism, but the “body-ness” was removed, that sense of being the embodied individual loved by God. Freedom merchants have no place for God outside of His use as blesser and vindicator of America. It is of no importance that an individual iPod silhouette is loved by God. Those with unlimited minutes do not have unlimited freedom.

Paul encourages his protégé Timothy, “exercise yourself in godliness.” Again, the sweat, funk, and body-ness of the athlete make for the ideal metaphor. An Elvin Jones rhythm exploration, an above-time Sunny Murray solo, these things can also serve as physical expressions of the call to determination and *differentness*. What free jazz attempted to do was find a freedom beyond the freedom handed to it—not better, just further. The Christian call is to do the same: find,

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inhabit, and share with others a freedom beyond the one we have been sold—and are being sold—a freedom both further *and* better. ✦

J. D. Buhl lives in Concord, California. He teaches English and Literature in the junior high at Queen of All Saints School. The author would like to thank Kevin Adriano, QAS Class of 2009, for his bibliographical assistance.

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Suggested Free Jazz Recordings

Ornette Coleman, *Change of the Century* (Atlantic, 1960). His second album, with Charlie Haden, Don Cherry (pocket trumpet), and drummer Billy Higgins.

Ornette Coleman, *Free Jazz (A Collective Improvisation)* (Atlantic, 1960). The controversial "double quartet," with Haden, Cherry, and Higgins joined by Freddie Hubbard (trumpet), Scott LaFaro (bass), and Ed Blackwell (drums). Altoist Coleman is offset by Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet.

Eric Dolphy & Booker Little, *Memorial Album (Original Jazz Classics, 1961).* Ed Blackwell really rolls on this third volume of live recordings from the Five Spot by a short-lived quintet.

Cecil Taylor, *Nefertiti, the Beautiful One Has Come* (Freedom, 1962). "The first truly 'free' drummer," Sonny Murray, joins pianist Taylor and alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons in Copenhagen.

John Coltrane, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (Impulse, 1961). The "classic quartet" augmented by Eric Dolphy. In any of a number of configurations, some of the most searching and exciting jazz ever recorded.

Miles Davis, *Highlights from the Plugged Nickel* (Columbia, 1995). A six-song introduction to some very free (and often very strange) live recordings made with Wayne Shorter (tenor), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass), and Tony Williams (drums) in 1965.

Art Ensemble of Chicago, *Americans Swinging in Paris* (EMI, 2002). A thrilling compilation of recordings from 1969 and 1970 that features all the wondrous early artistry and oddity of this long-running free jazz group. Fontella Bass's vocal on "Thème De Yoyo" is not to be missed.