

John Zorn/
Bobby Previte

Poles Apart

BY KYLE GANN

Improvisation is an integral part of many world musics, but only Europe and North America host that unruly phenomenon known as *free improv*. Musicians in Africa, India, and the Middle East (and most jazz musicians here) grow up listening to improvisers play according to rules that the listening community intuitively understands. Lacking such a shared context, something has to be substituted to preserve the communication between performer and audience. Europe went through its flirtation with rule-less improv in the '60s; the recorded results can often be found languishing in \$1.99 cut-out bins (though one, AMM's *The Crypt*, achieved British best-seller status). More recently, Americans are treading that path, though their proximity to jazz helps them avoid many of the traps.

No one realizes the dangers involved better than John Zorn, whose work implies a stringent critique of experimental improv. I hear heroism in his music; like an intercultural Hercules, he grips the ontology of "the work" with one hand, that of the individual's inspired contribution with the other, and strains to keep them from crashing together. In this respect, *Cobra* (hat ART) strikes me as his most important recording. For the record listener (as opposed to the live audience member, who has the advantage of visual cues), it sounds like a bizarrely fragmented postholocaust landscape: an electric bass gliss, some fast drumming with cymbal crashes, five notes of what sounds like Chopin, a few seconds of ragtime,

sound effects, all follow each other indiscriminately, as if accidentally displaced. The two-LP set contains two versions, live and studio; I find the live more multidimensional, providing a counterbalance to Zorn's manipulative tendencies. Both versions divide into symphonic movements, incongruously so since the changes come at least as fast in the "Lento/Mysterioso [sic]" as they do in the "Allegro." But the saving grace is that, somehow, these shards unify, not unlike the dish fragments in Julian Schnabel's infamous paintings.

Some may prefer the programmatic narrative of Zorn's even more recent *Spillane*, but for me the abstractness of *Cobra* creates a field in which more refined development can happen. And refinement would be welcome, for *Cobra*'s end impression is a question mark. Between the stoic rigidity of the structure and the anything-goes freedom of the details, there's an incongruity of form and content; in fact, *Cobra* admirably brings that friction into the foreground. The distinction between form and content, as a thousand artists have pointed out, is ultimately illusory, and by leaning more heavily on one than the other Zorn creates the same imbalance that Kagel and Stockhausen did in their open-form works of the '60s (though *Cobra*, with its rock references, sounds far less like Kagel than *Archery* did). Such coiled-up contra-



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Previte: intuition, logic, and no particular style

dictions give promise of epiphanic breakthroughs. For now, *Cobra* leaves the listener scratching his head.

Drummer Bobby Previte's *Pushing the Envelope* (Gramavision) takes a different strategy. Except in the final, title cut,

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Previte nurtures few experimental ambitions here, and much of the album stays within jazz's melodic and rhythmic boundaries. His intuitions, though, sometimes transcend jazz into a logic that depends on no particular style.

The entire album makes its points with confidence and enthusiasm, but it's the first cut, "Open World," that most caught my ear. Over a soft but driving rhythm, pianist Wayne Horvitz begins a five beat ostinato that sounds lifted from Berlioz's

"Queen Mab" scherzo. Nothing special so far, a lot of improvisers play over an ostinato. The ostinato repeats. It repeats again, but drops four notes. Again, adding two notes back. Eventually the whole pattern replicates itself, and you're halfway through the piece before it dawns on you that that ostinato is the theme. Previte's gang spins off repeated notes and flourishes around it as it crescendos, and every time Horvitz adds a riff, you think, "Here comes the melody." But they provide just enough to slow down that delicious perceptual change as a supposed background element gradually reveals itself as foreground.

Mozart's Piano Concerto in D Minor, K. 466, begins with a parallel device: in Mozart's day the soft, syncopated triads in the strings sounded unmistakably like accompaniment, but within a half-dozen measures you start to realize that they're all the theme you're going to get. I draw the comparison not to suggest that Previte was influenced by Mozart, or that his ideas are old-fashioned, but that Mozart and Previte both tapped into a fundamental musical truth, a perceptual rule so innate that it takes precedence over rules of style, structure, or culture. This kind of thinking is far too rare in new music, but Previte is an instinctual musician to whom such ideas seem to come spontaneously. The intuitive rightness of every improv here (with no little thanks to Marty Ehrlich on sax) makes *Pushing the Envelope* one of the finest releases by a New York artist in 1987.

They're diametrically opposed ways of coaxing form from improvisation: Zorn imposes artificial rules from without, Previte's intuitive logic shapes the music from within. Each creates a tension between the expectable and the unexpected, without which the listener would quickly become bored. And each faces up to free improv's first responsibility, which is to hit the listener with the same subtle thrills as traditional improv. Otherwise, why leave the tradition? ■

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