

Solo Saxophone Flights

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Solo saxophone performances are a demanding proposition.

For saxophonists, it is the ultimate artistic risk. Audiences are often not prepared for the stark power that can be conveyed in a solo sax show, nor for the prolonged concentration required to absorb music that is often far afield from familiar jazz environs. There is an intrinsic element of confrontation to an unaccompanied saxophone solo—between the artist and his horn and the room; between the audience and their preconceptions—which partially accounts for this elemental approach to music remaining on the margins.

Another factor in the relative obscurity of solo saxophone is that its history has been built on misinformation. Jazz histories generally cite Coleman Hawkins' "Picasso," recorded in 1948 for Norman Granz's *The Jazz Scene*, as the first jazz solo saxophone recording (it is included on Verve's expanded CD repackaging of the classic collection of 78s and photographs). They're wrong. Despite historian J.R. Taylor's evidence that "Picasso" was recorded in 1946, Hawkins' own "Hawk's Variations" was waxed first, in January 1945. But what really clouds the Hawk-dominated Genesis story of the solo sax performance is Fats Waller reedman Gene Sedric's 1937 unaccompanied tenor recording, "Saxophone Doodle." And according to historian Vladimir Simosko, baritone saxophonist Serge Chaloff made a solo tenor recording of "Body and Soul" in 1939 or '40, suggesting solo flights began earlier and were more widespread than commonly believed.

Yet, the most prejudicial misconception surrounding the history of the solo saxophone is that it is the exclusive domain of an obscurant avant garde, hell-bent on sonic abrasion. It's a rap that doesn't withstand the facts, unless you lump Lee Konitz's ruminative 1974 release *Lone-Lee (Steeplechase)* in with notorious squallathons like Kaoru Abe's 1977 *Solo Live at Gaya (DIW)* series. In 1960, Sonny Rollins was the toast of the jazz world, his sardonic wit at its zenith,

and Eric Dolphy had yet to become the poster boy of anti-jazz, though he had the most lacerating alto attack on the scene; but Rollins' '58 reading of "Body and Soul" (Brass and Trio; Verve) and Dolphy's solo alto recordings of "Tenderly" in '60 (Far Cry; OJC) are among their most straightforward, heartfelt performances. Even avatars like Anthony Braxton and Steve Lacy seem to save their most poignant compositions—like Braxton's hushed ballads collected as "Composition 138" on 19 [Solo] Compositions, 1988 (New Albion) and Lacy's elegiac "Blues for Aida" (Blues for Aida; Egg Farm)—for solo saxophone.

Since Braxton's first solo alto saxophone concert in 1967, the thrust of solo saxophone music has been to expand conceptual and technical parameters. Yet, within that general mandate, two trends have emerged. Represented by Braxton and Lacy (who credits a 1970 Braxton solo concert for inspiring his own work), one trend conceptualizes solo music as a conduit between a saxophonist's improvisational lexicons and a body of compositions—originals and jazz perennials alike. The other, favored by both arch hard-bopper Jackie McLean and free improviser John Butcher, fuses method and form, as most, if not all decisions concerning both the general shape and specific details of the performance are made in mid-flight.

These excerpts from recent interviews reveal the diversity of sensibilities currently shaping this risky, rewarding endeavor.

Anthony Braxton:

I see my solo alto saxophone music as part of the genesis components of my thought system. From the beginning I was looking for something more than interesting compositions. I wanted to reexamine the propositions of the music and be a part of its translation from idiomatic focuses to form-building strategies. Like Johann Sebastian Bach and Duke Ellington, I wanted to build from improvisation, using mutable logics to better understand identity. The solo music is the platform that helped me understand the composite identity of my system. I was looking for a trans-idiomatic understanding of identity, since from the very beginning it was very

clear to me that my music was in between the jazz world and the classical world, in-between the African-American world and the European-American world, in-between the liberals and the conservatives.

At that point, I started to put together different mixtures of the 12 Language Types to create compositional logics, ways of utilizing materials to respond to the challenge of syntactical structure. That allowed me to be in an open improvisational space, while being firmly planted within definite working constructs. I was never interested in freedom and I was never interested in non-freedom. Rather, I was interested in responding to the people whose music excited me: John Coltrane, Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Eric Dolphy, the solo music of Fats Waller and Coleman Hawkins.

Since 1966, my solo music materials have evolved consistently along the same lines of my composite music system, while unifying the polarities of my music system. The solo music is kind of a seed, where I test and evolve specific vocabularies as an improviser in a mutable, real-time, three-dimensional space. I then translate the successful components into composition theory and philosophical theory—the Tri-Axiom Writings and the Ritual and Ceremonial Musics—and, more recently, the story structures of the Trillium opera complex.

Since the beginning, I have included the tradition in my solo alto saxophone concert because I have tried to keep a relationship with the tradition, not because of the political pressure, but because I love the tradition. I see my work as an affirmation of the tradition, as opposed to a rejection of the tradition. Part of the challenge is to continue to explore the repertoire, to return to compositions that I love—like “You Go to My Head” or “East of the Sun, West of the Moon”—and to approach the traditional material in a non-traditional context that produces a fresh experience of the material and the tradition. I recorded “Come Sunday” in 1969 and deconstructed the materials rather than approach them in a strict linear way. For me, the diversity of approaches has allowed me to stay excited about the music.

Steve Lacy:

In a solo concert, the important thing is contrast and space, and having a comprehension of the whole thing. You can take chances, but there has to be a certain preparation, because it will fall apart with one or two wrong notes. The first tune has to be the right opening, not too this and not too that, not too broad and not too specific, and you have to get out of it fast enough that you don't kill yourself. In a solo concert, you risk entropy and you risk suicide. You have to be very careful to keep it alive. A solo concert is life or death.

The issue with "Ten of Dukes" [based upon a selection of Ellington compositions, commissioned by the San Francisco Jazz Festival in 1999], then, were the contrasts, the order, the variety, the different tempi and registers, and the techniques I used in doing it. It was also a question of love—which tunes I wanted to play—and a question of which tunes I thought were not done to death, because if you do the tunes that have been done over and over in a solo concert, you're asking for trouble. There are certain Ellington pieces that have not been done too much, and I chose some of them, like "Morning Glory," "Azure" and a few others that haven't been killed by over-employment.

I experimented a lot, tried out a lot of different pieces, and came up with 10 Ellington pieces where the tonalities and the tempi and the registers wouldn't cancel each other out, because if you played three tunes with the same tempo or in the same register, you'll kill yourself, so that has to be avoided at all costs. I've been pretty lucky, because I've done the piece 15 or 16 times in the last year, and it's still alive.

If a piece is alive, the more you do it, the more it unfolds. I think the word "unfolds" is very important. It's not something you determine yourself— "Well, this must be like this, and this must be like that." No. It's a question more of the material itself wanting to deploy itself in the best possible way for itself, and you just try to follow along and try not to spoil it. The material itself determines how you deal with it. I listen to the material itself and it tells me where it wants to

be and how long it wants to go on. The more I do it, the more it unfolds, becomes like itself. That's the important consideration: it wants to become like it wants to become. I'm just the medium in this situation.

It took months and months of research, of practice, of getting these pieces up to snuff, before they even settled in a sequence, before it became clear which way they should go. It's a complicity of materials when you do a piece like this. When you do research, one thing leads to another, and you just follow the information to where it leads you. It's a listening process, where you tune into a process that's out of your hands. That went on with "Ten of Dukes," very distinctly. And it's still going on, because the more I do it, the more it changes and becomes the way it's supposed to come.

In some cases, I used sheet music versions of the pieces to get at the essential things, and in other pieces I've gone just by memory and by ear. They put themselves together in a variety of ways, and each piece presented different problems. They suggested techniques to me, because they are orchestral pieces, not just lead sheets. To reduce an orchestra of 16 musicians to one voice was part of the challenge. Take a piece like "Ko-Ko" and try to reduce that to one voice. I always have a nightmare where I am doing a version of "La Sacre du Printemps" as a saxophone solo, and this process was close to that at points, deciding what voice to leave out, which to keep and which to modify.

All of the pieces surprised me, but "Prelude to a Kiss" was the one that took me the farthest out, because I got into this glissando technique that I have never used before. I found that I could do the whole melody in a glissando. This is a technique that was prevalent in the '20s and went out of saxophone playing by the '30s. Saxophones are capable of great glissandi, but I've never really used it much. But in preparing "Prelude to a Kiss," I found myself using the technique to a degree that I've never approached before; it was difficult, challenging, and it grew right out of the research, really. "Azure" was another one. I used a polyphonic technique of singing one voice and playing another to get a chord, another thing I've

never done before after almost 50 years of playing the saxophone. The piece really demanded it, though, and it pitched me over into a deep research mode, and in preparing it and practicing every day for a while, I began to enjoy the research aspect of it. There were six or seven techniques that came into the piece the same way—growls, animal sounds, different things like that, some of which are ancient, but were brand new to me. It was fascinating to go through it. So, I have to thank Duke again for making me learn, inspiring me to go back to the drawing board and back to the woodshed. And to take risks.

Jackie Mclean:

My whole idea for solo saxophone concerts is complete improvisation. When I know I'm going to give a solo concert, I start practicing two weeks before the concert for endurance. When I'm building up my endurance, that's all that I'm doing. I'm not laying out a program. I'm not thinking in those terms at all. All of my playing is in sequences, anyway—melodies, chord changes, you know. This way, I can move freely from one type of feeling to another...

Also, when I'm practicing for endurance, I'm practicing across the instrument in a way that I can play things that will be continual. If the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" comes into my mind—bam!—I go there until something else comes into my thought process. I might play the blues for a little while, or go and quote a melody from Thelonious or Bud. The moment you know you can play anything is a wonderful moment for me.

The only thing that concerns me before a concert is endurance. When I went out to play at the Grace Cathedral, I knew I had to have my chops together and be able to stand there for 40 minutes and play and make sense, be strong and be musical. But I also knew I had to be totally loose and free, with no particular keys to play in, and no particular rhythms to follow.

I have a friend who is a boxer, and we talk on the phone a lot. When I'm getting ready for a solo concert, I start by playing long tones.

When I'm playing long tones, I tell my friend that I'm hitting the heavy bag. Poum! Holding the note as long as I can, and doing this for 40 minutes. Then I go to what I call the speed bag. Usually, when you hear a boxer hit a speed bag, it's like dudala-dudala-dudala-dudala around the instrument. It gets my fingers good and loose. I play through keys, anything that I think will help me when it's time for me to step up in front of the audience, that living, breathing thing that's waiting for me to do something exciting, something musical, something that will keep them entertained for 40 minutes with no drummer, no bass player, nobody but God to help me.

John Butcher:

An improviser's viewpoint, and an improviser's experience, comes mainly from playing with other people. The thing that gives improvisation its freshness is having to deal with other people's ideas. Playing solo is a peculiar situation in that you're only dealing with your own ideas. It's not obvious what replaces that stimulus of other people's ideas. There's quite a danger in solo improvising of falling into a pattern, playing stuff you know, and presenting these routines almost like they're compositions. It never feels very satisfactory doing that. I often find that when I'm playing and I've hit upon something that I know will work, and will produce quite good music, I have the strange feeling that I have to leave it alone, and not go with it. It's that kind of ambivalence that's operating all the time in a practical way.

It boils down to a balance between just going with things that you know will be successful and trying to discover new connections and slightly different possibilities each time. I think you need a fair proportion of the latter, particularly if you're going to do it a number of times a year. If you're just going to play solo once or twice a year, it wouldn't be a problem. Occasionally, you'll get five or six solo gigs in a row, and then it's almost a personal psychological thing instead of a musical thing, because if you're playing something from the night before, no one in the audience knows, which makes it even more important to leave it alone. But there's only a fair proportion of a concert where you can do that, because you can't throw

everything out; there's no way you can really start over each night. You just try to keep a bit of it like that every night. One thing that is on your side is that every room is a different acoustic, which suggests some things that will work and some things that won't work. That forces your hand a little, not so much in the broad sweep of things, but in the details.

I think the real technical limitation of the saxophone in solo playing is its lack of sustain. The instruments most commonly accepted as solo instruments have sustain, in the sense that you can play a note, create a sound, and that sound carries on without having to maintain the physical input. With wind instruments, of course, if you stop blowing, there's no sound. That presents an awful lot of musical problems. There's no getting around the inability to produce a sound while another sound is decaying. That's why it is so physically demanding to play solo, because you're blowing all the time, unless you're in a church or somewhere where the room helps you some. Some people who aren't used to playing solo are blown-out after a 10-minute piece. There are many opportunities for little rests when you're improvising in a group. There's a couple of things I do to help me physically. I have a natural interest in using a certain amount of silence in the course of a piece, which can help a lot. I also alternate between soprano and tenor, partly because of their sonic characters, but also because you use your muscles differently, and you're not straining the same muscles all the time. By alleviating the physical stress, you're less likely to fall into patterns and more likely to play something really fresh and new.

I use a lot of materials, which work in what are potentially unstable areas of the saxophone, like playing chords. Some chords you can get [snaps]—like an ordinary note; others are very contingent on the reed and where you're coming from before you play them. There's quite a bit of leeway for things not coming out quite as you anticipate. It's dealing with the unpredictability of those situations that can lead you off somewhere unexpected sometimes. Technically, there's only a thin dividing line between the sound you want and some horrible squawk. But I find this instability quite creative, particularly when you're using techniques that aren't part of

the common saxophone repertoire. Because they are so striking, you actually have to be more careful how you use them as ingredients than the usual vocabulary of the saxophone.

Sometimes, the more striking a sound is, the less you should use it.

Top Flights

In addition to the cited recordings, these 10 CDs constitute a thumbnail survey of solo saxophone music since Anthony Braxton's 1968 watershed *For Alto* (Delmark), which has yet to be reissued on CD.

Hamiet Bluiett: *Birthright: A Solo Blues Concert* (1977; India Navigation)

Anthony Braxton: *Wesleyan (12 Altosolos)* 1992 (1992; hatART)

John Butcher: *Thirteen Friendly Numbers* (1991; Acta)

Mats Gustafsson: *Impropositions* (1996; Phono Suecia)

Steve Lacy: *Only Monk* (1985; Soul Note)

David Liebman: *The Tree* (1990; Soul Note)

Joe McPhee: *Tenor & Fallen Angels* (1977; reissued 2000; hatOLOGY)

David Murray: *Solo Live* (1980; Cecma)

Evan Parker: *Conic Sections* (1989; ah um)

Sonny Rollins: *The Solo Album* (1985; Milestone/OJC)