



# John Zorn and the avant garde

## Comment

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John Zorn identifies with the American “maverick” tradition – which includes early 20th century modernism, late 20th century post-modernism, stubborn if not rugged individualism and contrarian pride, among other attributes common to many of today’s self-made artists. He’s a child of the late 1960s, an auto-didactic expert of innovative jazz, vivid pop, Western classical and indigenous musics world-wide. For some contemporary listeners, he personifies the avant-garde of a certain time and place — downtown New York City, locale and/or mindset, as it has evolved from mid 1970s’ urban grit to the gold-plated Manhattan of today, and yet he’s not a scene-maker, a hit-maker, a celebrity. For going on 40 years John Zorn has been firmly though not exclusively a member of the avant-garde — especially as he addresses fundamentals of the organization of sound and challenges himself to keep music fluid, adaptable, unpredictable, new.

I first heard Zorn live on Charlie Parker’s Death Day in 1978. He was paying tribute to Bird with guitarist Eugene Chadbourne, braying the fast bebop lines on alto sax and clarinet, then breaking them down with duck calls, whistles, squawks, honking toys and half-filled water glasses spread out on a table. The occasion was part concert/part performance/part punk-art statement — Zorn has always been happiest forging his own formats, running things his own way.

He has always explored polarities and extremes, conflated the central and the marginal, employed fast dynamics and intense densities, though also often solo gestures of stark sparseness. Zorn breaks forms to make forms; he plays what he preaches (these days almost exclusively on his alto sans add-ons). He's got attitude to spare and energy for relentless activity. At the age of 58, Zorn still flaunts his *enfant terrible* assertiveness, but he's also moved beyond his initial knee-jerk iconoclasm to compose a beloved book of lyrical, harmolodically (as per Ornette Coleman) and rhythmically buoyant songs for chamber ensembles (jazz or otherwise): Masada.

Zorn has been unusually generous and, against type, community-oriented, enabling a large, diverse coterie of creators to share his personal good fortune by running the artist-produced Tzadik record label and his Lower East Side performance space, the Stone.

An aesthetically open-minded, business-smart stance is an avant one for an avant-gardist to adopt (who else did that? Duchamp.) Time will tell whether Zorn is a major or minor influence, a Cage, Partch, Sun Ra or Zappa, whether his witty games pieces are ever played or anyone bothers with his soundtracks or music for strings. But right now, John Zorn should be known as a juggler of conventions who reaches beyond them, a man directing "free" interactive collective improvisations within implacable rules. John Zorn and the avant-garde? Of course. He's here, about to pounce, sharp and sardonic, shaking minds.

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