

About the music in an imperfect world

Interview with Matthew Shipp



Picture by Lena Adasheva

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Music is for listening, painting is for looking at and so on. However, people have always liked to talk about them. People can talk a lot about everything – even about silence. Does it irritate you?

In a perfect world we would not need to talk about the music – it would just exist in its isness – there is an old saying: if Johnny can paint a picture, why would Johnny want to talk about it – talk is cheap, but I guess the human experience being what it is, we have to construct constructs about the things – we do.

It seems impossible to define what jazz is today – but it is good for jazz. However – is it possible to define what is (modern) music today? What do you think about the most extreme experiments in philharmonic music and in other arts today?

I have no opinion about anything – I don't really keep up with the current extreme experiments in other arts and music – if people are exploring certain things, then I assume that the world has a need of those things being explored.

You don't like to speak about music in terms of definitions and models. What about your ways of communicating with other musicians? Is improvised music a kind of language for professional musicians? Or is it nothing special? (When I was a teenager I loved to listen to the technical, incomprehensible conversations of my favourite musicians...)

I try not to talk about music with the people I play with – we know where each other is coming from, so unless there is a specific technical thing about a piece that we need to talk about in a rehearsal, then unless that is the case we might as well talk about other things – of course we sometimes talk about other musicians who inspire us or a certain album but it's not in a highly technical language.

How well do you need to know musicians to play well with them? Is it enough if they are excellent at what they do, or do they have to impress you?

I need to feel very close to the musicians I play with – as long as I know we are coming from the same place then I have an unconscious bond with them – that unconscious bond is what is important – that is where the real communication takes place.

Last year I saw your concert in Torun, Poland. You were performing with three Polish musicians. Allegedly, you had hardly any rehearsals before the concert, but the concert was very cohesive. What's the secret?

I don't know what the secret to that concert was – I think of myself as a good and responsive musician who is very intentive to do whatever needs to be done to make a concert a whole experience about the ensemble – so if that is my intent and all the other musicians are mature and have the same intent we will find a way to make the concert a unified experience that has balance and cohesion of some sort.

You are often asked about the convergence of jazz and the classical tradition. Is there any convergence between your compositions and other arts or other human activities? Is it possible?

My music converges with many realms of thought for I don't believe there is any such thing as music – to me the universe is all vibration and energy and it seems to cohere into separate activities like making music, but at base making music and linguistics and any other science like boxing are all the same – the generation of a

force field of structure – so an activity that on the surface of the world seems to be making music – beneath the surface converges with everything.

You have once brilliantly compared jazz to boxing. Both of them require coordination of movements, as well as improvisation. In your opinion, is there still an element of challenge, opposition or even struggle in this music? Or do they no longer exist?

I don't know what challenge – opposition or struggle is in the music as pertains to boxing – everything has an element of going to war in it – if it did not the elements would never metamorphose into other things.

We were happy to know that you object to monopolizing jazz and funding musical conservatism. Do you agree that this objection is, to a degree, reflected in your music?

The music is the music – so the objection to the fascism of the Lincoln Center and the jazz neo conservatives is not directly reflected in the music in an overt way – other than the fact that they could never produce music like I do, because their minds and spirits are sick, and I would never want to produce music like they do.

What do you think: what are the sources of education for the avant – garde art's audience? On the one hand, there is the artist who says: 'Fuck the world, I do my own music'⁶⁶. On the other hand, people like their habits...

Life is the source of education for avant art audiences – mainly being exposed to a lot of things.

In your opinion, are young listeners resistant to attempts at manipulating their musical tastes? Does any threat exist in this context?

If you get a person while they are young and if you teach them to have a flexibility of mind, they are open to a lot of things – mainly they should be shown that if there are different expressions of music and art, there must be a reason why groups of artists do certain things, so except for thinking something is weird, why don't you investigate the worldview and the motives of the artists involved. Of course it is hard to even get there because people see everything as a commodity now.

⁶⁶ The quotation is from your interview (by Dave Reitzes, Perfect Sound Forever magazine, 1999): *So, in Monk's case, you have this iconoclastic pianist whose attitude is, 'Fuck the world, I do my own music.'*

Going back to the subject of improvisation: until the 17th century it was something common in music. Later, this changed – and now, one can talk about improvised and non – improvised music. Is it very harmful – with regard to musical education, performing music...?

If the premise of improvisation was accepted in western culture, it would be natural and the teaching it would be as natural as "teaching" to breathe, which of course we don't have to teach – it is instinct. Even though improv existed in classical music and of course exists in so-called jazz now, the premise has never been accepted in western world, for our sickness of mind makes us scared of unconscious processes – so a controlled event like writing out on paper makes us more secure – and, hence, since the Western world does not except unconscious process, how to teach improv or how to open up these processes is foreign to our constructs of who we are.

Changes in music are accompanied by changes in the way instruments are played. There is such a thing as musical education, but you have once said that jazz shouldn't be taught at school but in individual contact with musical masters. Is there such a thing as the proper way of using an instrument?

I have no idea if there is a proper way to play an instrument – in fact I would think there is not – what is an accepted practice is just that – an accepted practice, but it could have developed in infinite ways – and the sound in your mind is what is important – if that is a strong image, you can physically produce the sound even with a supposedly wrong technique.

What can you tell us about the piano you usually use for practice? What are your expectations from an instrument you play?

I have no expectations for an instrument except for it to work and be in tune – even if it is not, I have to approach the instrument for what it is – find its personality and make it work for what it is – every piano has its own personality.

I ask about the piano because saxophone or trumpet players can easily travel with their instruments, even they should have more than one – you, on the other hand, have to rely on unfamiliar instruments in unfamiliar places. Someone could say that it is difficult for a piano player to have such a close personal relationship with an instrument as musicians playing smaller, portable instruments can have, as they are hardly ever apart. Is that the case?

Again every piano has its cosmos – you have to figure out what it is and make it work for what you are... whether it was an old upright or a concert grand, Monk could superimpose his personality on it and make it all sound like him.

You are a very busy man. Do you have a regular day timetable? What time do you get up?

I get up at 8 – answer email and facebook – eat – take care of business – talk to my agent and record company – go to post office and take care of some things like that. The afternoon is piano practice and composing! – at night answer phone calls, read – more emails – then try to surf internet and watch some news.

In one of your interviews you mentioned that you are inspired not by specific things or phenomena in the world but by movement, the energy flowing through this world. Is there any mystical or intellectual tradition you are close to?

Mystic tradition I feel closest to is the tao – then kundalini yoga – and mysticism as it exists in American transcendentalism, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau.

Could the fact that you focus on energy and process be a useful hint for musicians' education? Or should it be focused on practicing playing instruments and, at that point, any philosophy is superfluous?

Early education should be focused on learning to play correctly – whatever that means – as you start getting your own ideas, then you should transition into developing a technique to express your own ideas, even if that goes against everything you learned when learning to play correctly – whatever that means.

Biographies of musicians are full of anecdotes regarding sudden, brilliant beginnings of their passion. If you were to point to such a – mostly symbolic – event in your life, would it be seeing Ahmad Jamal and Nina Simone on television when you were twelve, or another, earlier event?

The early years of learning are so rich – and complex and murky because so much is going on that it is hard to find those exact eureka moments, but seeing Nina and Ahmad were two very important things for me – TV, which usually deadens the mind. actually opened mine up in these two instances.

If you were to assess your musical road up until now, is there anything you regret or that you are ashamed of?

I regret nothing and am ashamed of nothing – I am who I want to be and had I changed anything, I would be someone different.

Can you imagine not being a musician? Is there any activity you could devote yourself to in such case?

I can imagine being anything – I am meant to be the new music jazz musician I am – but if I had had the talent of throwing and ducking punches, I would have gone into boxing – etc, etc.

Which one of your albums do you recommend for young listeners who are still unfamiliar with your music?

I think my new CD – 'Elastic Aspects' is my best – from there I would say "Zo" and "New Orbit" are good introductions to my music and maybe my electro acoustic CD 'Equilibrium'.