

DEXTER

GORDON

- AND HIS STYLE

-EARLY INFLUENCES

-THE INSTRUMENTAL SOUND

-THE IMPROVISATION

-THE COMPOSITIONS

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Introduction

Jazz – a musical language.

When listening to the duet between Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy on *What Love*¹ it soon becomes obvious that there is more at stake here than just music. During Eric Dolphy's solo Mingus enters on bass and goes into a dialogue with Dolphy's bass-clarinet, and gradually this conversation develops into a regular verbal fight with Mingus in the role of the aggressive masculine voice and Dolphy as his hysterical and sobbing female counterpart. This whole event is clearly *not* to be understood purely as music, but rather as a veritable verbal argument.

Within these few minutes the distinction between music and the spoken language is broken down, the duet has turned into a spoken dialogue, but –mind you– a *musical* dialog without any specific meaning. All the parameters that we normally associate with music –melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumental sound– have been replaced with the ways of expression associated with the human voice, the sound and modulations of the voice, the violent emotional outbursts and the timing of the dialogue between the two people involved.

This analogy between jazz as a musical expression and the spoken language has received greater focus in the field of jazz research within the past ten years. Based on a large number of interviews two young musicologists, Ingrid Monson and Paul F. Berliner, have surveyed the musicians own perceptions of the improvisational praxis within the jazz tradition, and the result of their research has extensive consequences for our understanding of the inner dynamics of jazz improvisation.²

This analogy between language and improvisation is deeply rooted in the spoken language of Black Americans, which in a number of ways differs from Anglo-American norms. In general one may characterize the Black American oral language as a humorous and indirect ambiguous playing with words, as opposed to the Western ideal which to a larger extent is focused on the intellectual discourse:

"In the Western classical music tradition, this preference has manifested itself in the long tradition of separating musical theory from practice, which is perhaps fitting for a musical tradition in which composition has in principle been separated from the moment of performance. In improvisation, composed through face-to-face interaction, however, the separation of sounds from the human beings who produce them makes far less sense."³

What further separates the Black American spoken language from Anglo-American is its special melodious aspects and its timing as one finds it in the Black churches of America; a good preacher will always build up his sermon gradually in such a way that he invites the congregation into a dialogue in call-response patterns, as exemplified in the following excerpt of 'The Beloved Prostitute'.⁴ Here Rev. Williams interprets the text in a rhythmically and melodically 'chanted sermon' applying short and emphatic statements, which allows the congregation to respond with a singing "Yeah" or powerfull shouts like "Tell it!" og "Say it!"

*Preacher**Congregation:*

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| "And I heard him saying – to Israel | |
| Ah you have forgotten about God; | Yeah |
| You <i>have</i> forgotten aboutah | |
| The <i>man</i> who brought you – across the Red Sea | Yeah |
| Ah <i>you have</i> forgotten <i>about</i> the God | Ah |
| Whoah fed you for forty years | Yeah |
| In the wilderness. | Yeah |
| Andah you're <i>servin</i> Gods now, | Yeah! |
| Whoah <i>have</i> eyes and cannot see. | Yeah |
| Nnnh <i>have</i> ears and cannot hear | Tell it! Yeah |
| Andah you <i>know my</i> brother and sister | Yeah |
| Oh <i>Lordah</i> , we today have sold ourselves. | Yeah |
| Nnnh so <i>many of us</i> today have prostituted our souls | Yeah |
| Oh Lordah, we <i>sold our</i> souls – to Satan and all of hisimps. | Yeah |
| Nnh, we <i>prostituted ourselves</i> – to envy. | Yeah, Say it! |
| Nnh, and we <i>sold ourselves</i> – to hate. | Yeah (gradually more |
| Oh Lordah, we <i>sold ourselves</i> – to jealousy. | Yeah turbulence) |
| Aaandah, we <i>sold ourselves</i> – to all crime. | Yeah |
| Praise God, we <i>sold ourselved</i> – to bootleg. | Yeah |
| Nnh, and we <i>sold ourselves</i> – to the numbergame. | Yeah" |

Monson's and Berliner's many interviews with jazz musicians unambiguously points towards the understanding of improvisation as a musical language which is deeply rooted in Afro-American culture and language. This fact has far reaching implications for our understanding of the musician's individual style of playing and the overall principles for the construction of the improvised solo-lines, and for our understanding of the interaction within the combo.

A jazz musician's personal *tone and phrasing* is closely related to qualities of the human voice known from the vocal artikulation of the blues which is unmistakable in the playing of for instance Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, or the imitation of speech articulation heard in the Charles Mingus-Eric Dolphy dialogue mentioned above.

But also the *construction of the solo improvisation* is to be understood as more than just a musical phenomenon with a close relationship to the spoken word. Lester Young referred to the act of improvisation as *storytelling*, applying words (musical licks or smaller motives), which were tied together syntactically into coherent melodic phrases and in the end making a whole story (the overall disposition of the solo):

"if a guy plays a beautiful solo and he's playing from the heart or he's talking with his horn, we say, 'He's telling a story.'" ⁵

The improvising musician –our storyteller- thus builds his solo from smaller musical ideas or fragments, which are combined logically to create continuity and coherence in the solo line:

"After you initiate the solo, one phrase determines what the next is going to be. From the first note that you hear, you are responding to what you've just played: you just said this on your instrument, and now that's a constant. What follows from that? And then the next phrase is a constant. What follows from that? And so on and so forth. And finally, let's wrap it up so that everybody understands that that's what you're doing. It's like language: you're talking, you're speaking, you're responding to yourself. When I play, it's like having a conversation with myself." ⁶

To understand jazz improvisation as a musical language also has implications for the understanding of the collective interaction in the combo, the interaction between the musicians in the rhythm section and between the soloist and the rhythm section:

"it is not enough for a musician to play through a tune with only its melody and harmonic structure in mind, as many jazz pedagogy books would have us believe; the player must be so thorough familiar with the basic framework of the tune that he or she can attend to whatever everyone else in the band is doing." ⁷

"Good jazz improvisation is sociable and interactive just like a conversation: a good player communicates with the other players in the band. If it doesn't happen, it's not good jazz." ⁸

This *internal musical dialogue* in the combo can assume many different forms. The soloist may take the lead –'tell a story'– and possibly invite the rhythm section to make comments, much in the same way as in the 'chanted sermon' above. Or the musical dialogue may take the form of an open discussion, where everybody in turn joins in and comments on each other –as jive talk, discussion, friendly conversation or maybe common gossip. Also the dialogue may take certain forms analogous to the spoken dialogue, like a heated argument, quarrel, competition ("anything you can do, I can do better!") or maybe a tender love duet.

The two tenors.

While studying musicology at the University of Aarhus back in the seventies I was fortunate to hear Dexter Gordon live on many occasions. In those years Dexter had his residence in Denmark and often played with the local rhythm sections or fellow American musicians who were stopping by, friends like Red Rodney, Hampton Hawes, Barry Harris, Sonny Stitt, Johnny Griffin or Jackie McLean.

On one particular night, September 19, 1976, at *Jazzhus Tagskægget* in Århus, a puzzling incident occurred, which over the next few days gave me an occasion to reflect on the particular improvisational style of Dexter. Dexter was playing with the locals, and among them Lars Rørbeck, a fine pianist who happened to be a good friend of mine. At one time during the first set Dexter announced a blues, it might have been *The Jumpin' Blues*, and after the theme Lars strolled, leaving Dexter alone with bass and drums. We were all expecting Lars to come back in after the first four or five choruses, but nothing happened, he was just sitting up there looking down at his keys.

A while later Dexter began to signal over his back that *Now Was The Time*, but still nothing happened. After what seemed to be an eternity (probably somewhere around 20-25 choruses, Dexter always took long solos) Lars finally came back and stayed in there for the remainder of the tune.

During intermission, when I asked Lars why he didn't come back from his stroll, he replied: "I couldn't, I tried desperately, but I couldn't! Everytime I would think up something to take me back in, I found that whatever I could come up with would conflict with Dexter's lines, *because his playing was so strong!*"

This of course puzzled me, because Lars was a generally known as a very strong pianist with a good comp and an extraordinary sense of harmony. But the incident made me realize that Dexter's solo improvisations were not merely improvisations, but intelligent melodic lines in rhythm *being carefully constructed*, brick by brick, out of a profound knowledge of harmony and the chordal foundation of the tunes. Dexter's highly intellectual process of improvisation dealt first of all with the coherence of his own musical statements. His well known laid back rhythmical phrasing might be seen as an additional indication of a musician, who was entangled in his own work of construction, more or less regardless of the musical surroundings. Therefore, for the strolling pianist to re-enter it would be necessary first to understand the musical logic of Dexter's line completely in order to anticipate its requisite continuation.

Years later, when I told Maxine Gordon about this incident, she said, "Oh yeah! A lot of the pianists had difficulty coming back from a stroll with Dexter, Kenny Drew always complained about that, and Dexter would just say, Well, then *don't stroll!*"

Another concert, the date is July 6, 1987, Stan Getz is playing at *Jazzhouse Montmartre* in Copenhagen with his quartet, Kenny Barron on piano, Rufus Reid on bass and Victor Lewis on drums. The quartet style is primarily characterized by a constant internal musical conversation between these four excellent and attentive musicians. Everything that Getz would come up with that night seemed to be reflecting the playing of Barron, Reid and Lewis. And on the other hand the rhythm section seemed to follow Getz closely, whenever he would change mood or dynamics during his solos on such standards as *Stella by Starlight* or *I Can't Get Started*.⁹

The inner dynamics of the Dexter Gordon and the Stan Getz quartets and the balance between the two soloists and their respective rhythm sections as described above seemed light years apart. When I later asked bassist Rufus Reid, who also played regularly with Dexter between 1977 and 1979, how he experienced the difference in playing with these two tenor giants, he would compare the American Dexter Gordon Quartet (with George Cables on piano and Eddie Gladden on drums) with a freight train starting off at full power, leaving Dexter out there to do his thing. Whereas Getz preferred to have more colours on his palette, inviting the rhythm section to interact with his playing. Where the dialogue between the soloist and the rhythm section was essential to the Stan Getz Quartet, it was almost non existing with the Dexter Gordon Quartet (again according to Reid, "Dexter didn't really interact that way.")

Although there were similarities in the playing of Dexter Gordon and Stan Getz (both were heavily influenced by Lester Young, both were extraordinary melodic

inventive, they both demonstrated a thorough knowledge of harmonic theory and had an untroubled instrumental technique), they were widely different in their instrumental sound and single note attack. But the main difference in style had to do with the two different approaches they required from the rhythm section.

In the following chapters I will attempt to elucidate the components of Dexter Gordon's style and some of its most prominent influences, succeeded by an analysis of how this style is reflected in Dexter's solo improvisations and his original compositions.