

## TO THE LEFT: FREE JAZZ

by Ian Muldoon\*

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*“I always feel that the most important aspects of great music can be elusive. Creating music that is intelligent and logical, and still has heart and soul, can be very difficult to achieve.”*

*-Michael Formanek (Notes to Time Like This, Intakt 2018).*



*Michael Formanek... PHOTO  
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**W**hen a conversation, sometimes leading to argument, turns to “free” jazz, all kinds of issues arise. Philosophically, it might represent the old saws about anarchy or noise, versus “proper” music which is in part about notated notes, balance, and structure for example where a clear beginning, a middle and end prevails.

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*\*Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child’s ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York & Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled “My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast”.*

Physiologically (neurology) we are told that during REM sleep the prefrontal cortex, the guardian of logic and rules, ceases to function, allowing dreams to freewheel fuelled by fears, hopes and imaginary delights. Outside the dreamworld Newtonian “laws” in the 20th century have been in part adjusted or modified. The foundations of Western music have been tested by the emergence of African-American music beginning in the blues and evolving to the now, and the playing of the likes of Australian musicians Sam Gill and Joseph Franklin - the former on a recent invention - the alto saxophone - and the latter on an ancient one, the guitar, in its contemporary modification of being electric and bass on their release *To My Left Is Where The Lake Is*.



*Saxophonist Sam Gill (above) and guitarist Joseph Franklin (below)...*



Both Franklin and Gill have been educated and mentored by Australian masters in modern music giving them the depth of knowledge and range of skills to augment their talents in their individual search for unique expression in the most challenging of modern musics - “free” jazz - which is an extension or advance in improvisation which, along with rhythm, is at the heart of jazz. When the great self-taught Louis

Armstrong went “free” and scatted wordless vocals with astonishing rhythmic power in the 1920s and beyond, this provided a taste of what artistic heights “free” could reach.

The release by Joseph Franklin (semi-hollow bass guitar) and Sam Gill (alto and soprano saxophones) *To My Left Is Where The Lake Is* (Creative Sources Recordings, 2019) is a musical exploration jointly composed by the musicians as they performed. Engineered and mixed by Franklin it has many moments but two works stand out as especially satisfying - *Pillaring Part 1 and 2*.



One surprise for me was the musical range and beauty of the semi-hollow bass guitar as played by Franklin. As a chordal instrument or rhythmic one, and in this latter role close to the sound of a traditional contra bass, it allows for intriguing solos as well as powerful accompaniment to the horn. In Gill and Franklin’s duo improvised performance, comparisons might sometimes be made with the raga where the melodic voice is taken by the saxophone and rhythmic and harmonic and percussive effects by the guitar.

But what is “free” music? The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk cites four types of music: new music, popular music, functional music and performance music. This last is energetic in its efforts to reach audiences but gives priority to creativity rather than trying to meet listener expectations whilst struggling to appeal to listeners\*.

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\**“The Aesthetic Imperative”, edited by Peter Weibel, translated by Karen Margolis.*



*The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (above) cites four types of music: new music, popular music, functional music and performance music...*

Jazz, including free jazz, is performance music. The essence of free jazz is individual expression which makes it paradoxically notoriously difficult to play and seemingly open to any player because it's (apparently) free of "rules". Like Jackson Pollock's art, the casual observer exclaims "anyone can do that!".

I recall a performance around 1973 by a tenor saxophonist in a gig at ANU who was screeching and wailing in full sonic flight. He may have been a genius or just someone who had learned to screech and wail on the tenor saxophone - it seemed no one could tell. But music is sound and music is language and both have rules - although "rules" may be the wrong word - perhaps "demands" is a better word. And what might those demands be?

For performing artists one demand of the artist is that the art be communicable. And a most, possibly the most, important demand of the listener is the process of attention. Humans, with their inbuilt predilection for the familiar, to remain at rest unless pushed, to be comforted, is the challenge for the artist. In times past at the usual jazz gig, the familiar, often from the Great American Songbook, would be sprinkled with originals perhaps to give the customers firstly what they paid to hear then an original to enlarge their listening experience.

In my life the experience of the artist who advances, even wildly popular artists like Bob Dylan and Miles Davis, may be pilloried, abused and ridiculed for moving away from their past performances. In Britain particularly there were “classic” jazz aficionados of collective polyphony who claimed classic jazz was ruined mainly by the individual solo voices of Sidney Bechet, and Louis Armstrong in his 1930s aggregations of big bands and orchestras.



*Even wildly popular artists like Bob Dylan (above) and Miles Davis (below), may be pilloried, abused and ridiculed for moving away from their past performances...*



Then of course came the “noise” and “squeaking” and “Byzantine improvisations” of Charlie Parker which they saw as the nail in the coffin. And then aficionados of Parker were shocked by Ornette Coleman’s sound explorations on a plastic saxophone. Coleman ended up performing one of his major works with the Houston Symphony. Today there are groups that play only originals and are deeply embedded in the “free jazz” zone.



*Aficionados of Charlie Parker (above) were shocked by sound explorations on a plastic saxophone by Ornette Coleman (below)... PARKER PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FORDHAM'S THE SOUND OF JAZZ; COLEMAN PHOTO COURTESY NEW YORK TIMES*



In my view there is nothing more beautiful in all art than the intimate conspiracy that occurs in the moment of creation between the artist and the individual listener. Sam Gill and Joseph Franklin are amongst a cohort of emerging artists who have the talent, skills and courage to forge ahead and, in my view, are representative of a renaissance in improvised music that has been happening over the past 20 years where young musicians have had not just great teachers and mentors but the recorded legacy on FMP and ECM and in Australia fine independent labels owned by artists themselves.

This is where teaching and teachers and mentors should be honoured for the contribution they have made to a new generation of players that has emerged in recent times. Perhaps even more than these teachers' individual artistic achievements, their legacy of outstanding students may be their greatest contribution to this art known as "jazz", an art which is so much more than that beleaguered label can possibly imply.

In the programme of seven performances on *To My Left Is Where The Lake Is*, Gill's soprano saxophone on *Saccade* (meaning rapid eye movements between fixation points) is gentle, teasing and playful at times, almost vocal in effects at others, and there is a shifting mix of intersections between the two instruments sometimes in conversation with each other, sometimes by the horn alone, whilst strong rhythmic foundation is given by the bottom end of the guitar under the horn.

*Pillaring* metaphorically may refer to the building and support of structures in this two-part composition. The first part opening with ominous arco bass, is hypnotically beautiful with a striking climax. Percussive slap tongue effects add to the listener's tension on this unpredictable journey. The second part begins in a lower register growling *lento* alto saxophone accompanied by guitar followed by a guitar solo and at the midpoint a throbbing bass guitar metre overlain with an exquisite middle register sax solo with long held expressive notes. The rhythmically enticing groove underpins a sweet, gentle sax closing in a felt minimalist solo.

Indeed, throughout the programme a minimalist approach is often evident in the space and air allowing the music to resonate. *Red Sun Recurring* is atmospheric in effect building in intensity featuring a range of percussive effects - "breathsound scrunching" included - reminiscent of John Zorn's works. *Ecstatic Joyous* at mid-tempo but with a sense of space and reflection between phrases, features percussive guitar strings.

An ominous *largo* bass and saxophone mouthpiece breathing sometimes in conversational reply to the other instrument, are part of the range of musical effects created in this minimalist effort (enjambment - the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line). The title track, the final one of the programme, is the most melodic piece, slow and lyrical effectively spaced and providing a delightful surprise with the beauty of the guitar playing and the lyricism of the alto saxophone.