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Jerry Garcia on Improvisation: The *On the Edge* Interview

DEREK BAILEY

Improvisation—the most widely practiced of all musical activities—is probably the least recognized or understood. Vague descriptions like “making it up as you go along” or “playing off the top of your head” give no idea of the pervasiveness and the power of improvisation in music. Perhaps the air of mystery that surrounds it is inevitable: improvisation has to do with change, adjustment, development—elusive ideas. It isn’t any one style of music; it doesn’t belong to East or to West, but it is the creative force in these and many other musics. It’s present everywhere in the most complex musical designs and in the earliest attempts at music-making.

Jerry Garcia: When I started playing the guitar, the person I played with was a cousin of mine who actually had band experience in school, and we both got guitars, little electric guitars, from pawn shops. I was fifteen, I think; he was seventeen. We started banging around together, playing around and learning stuff, and he’s the first person who I ever heard use the word “improvisation.”

“Improvise, what does that mean?”

He [says], “It means just make it up as you go along.”

“Oh, what a great idea!”

So that was my first exposure to it, which also corresponds with my beginning to actually play the guitar, so for me, I don’t believe that I could play without improvising on some level. That is to say, I don’t plan ahead; I could never bring myself to actually learn something, note for note, and play it that way more than once. It’s maybe deeply rooted

anti-authoritarianism; I don't know what it is, but it's something in my personality [that] just won't allow me to do it.

Derek Bailey: The Grateful Dead came together as a rock band in the sixties from the Bay Area of California. They play a synthesis of American music including jazz, folk, and blues. Basically a touring band, they see their audience of Deadheads more as extended family than rock music consumers, almost part of the band itself. One reason the Dead commands such loyalty is that they perform a different program each night and within that program, each number is altered through instrumental invention every time it is performed.

Jerry Garcia: If you say what we're doing here is we're inventing this as we go along and you are involved in this experience, and it's never gonna be this way again—this is it, for this particular version of it—there's value to that, and I think our audience is a proof of that. These are people who come back to every performance. If we do ten days somewhere, a lot of them will be back every night. They know that it's gonna be different every night.

The band that I'm in, everybody has the same disease that I have, which is the inability to do something exactly the same way twice. Sometimes it drives you nuts, you know. If you're composing something and you feel that there's a delicate little interaction that you always want to hear, forget it—it doesn't happen in the Grateful Dead. But other stuff does that is much more wonderful. But you have to be prepared to relinquish a certain amount of your ego involvement with it. It doesn't help to think that you're doing real great, you know.

A lot of times, too—this is another interesting thing—my perception of what's a good night for us may be totally different from everybody else's perception. The audience sometimes has a great night listening to us struggle, feeling that we never quite get together; sometimes we struggle the whole night without ever feeling like we've really agreed on anything, and sometimes the audience loves that. For them, sometimes that's the best stuff. So reporting is difficult. This starts to bleed over into aesthetics, like what's good music and what isn't, and it starts to get into the world of totally random observations.

We do our best playing publicly. We don't do our best playing privately, which is stock words from a lot of musicians. There are very many bands, certainly, that play rock and roll where improvisation is a large part of what they do. What you have now masquerading as rock and roll is in reality safe popular music that's largely the work of producers and less the work of musicians. The music business is basically economics: it's basically the thing of, when you make a record, you want players that don't make mistakes, you don't necessarily want players to take chances. You want players that don't make mistakes because economically that means less time in the studio. You get what you want on the record and it's safe and it's perfect, and that's been the thrust of music production in popular music, which has sort of co-opted rock and roll. Our audience, I think, illustrates that there's a lot of people who really want a musical experience rather than to be performed at.

To my mind, most performance stuff is really show business. It's entertainment, in the sense that there's the passive audience and there's the active performer, and the performer has a show and they do the show, in the same sense that a play is a show. And while it may change, may vary slightly from performance to performance, it's pretty much the same thing. And that's what most performers gear up to do: that's what their management encourages them to do, and that's what the music business as a whole encourages them to do, so there's really no opening in there.

The music business—which has almost nothing to do with music—doesn't encourage improvisation. It doesn't encourage taking chances, and it doesn't encourage music which is experimental in nature. It just doesn't.

I used to listen to early blues, Muddy Waters and all these Chicago guys. You could get half a dozen young city kids playing the same notes on their instruments, but there's something really scary about early blues records, and it's because each one of those guys who's playing like a two-bar pattern is like a guy that's maybe murdered half a dozen people and spent ten years in jail and he's packing a gun or a razor. And these guys are mean; these are killers, you know, so a killer playing the blues has a little more content than a kid from Palo Alto. The music is simple but the emotional power of it is incredible. So there's something about who it is that's doing the playing, quite apart from ability.

And then there's ability. There's also something really wonderful about hearing a really, really accomplished musician playing just beautifully, making it up, just improvising and flowing.

Note

This transcription includes only the episode segment with Garcia. It has been edited for clarity, chiefly to remove false starts and crutch words. Readers should watch the episode (Bailey 1992) to see the full context of Garcia's remarks, which also includes excerpts of performances by the Grateful Dead and additional segments devoted to other musicians. For more of Bailey's interviews with Garcia, see his book (Bailey 1993, 42–43, 46–47). One segment in the transcription published here appears there, in a different context:

[M]y perception of what's a good night for us may be totally different from everybody else's perception. The audience sometimes has a great night listening to us struggle, feeling that we never quite get together; sometimes we struggle the whole night without ever feeling like we've really agreed on anything, and sometimes the audience loves that. For them, sometimes that's the best stuff. So reporting is difficult. (Bailey 1993, 46)

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DEREK BAILEY (1930–2005) was a jazz guitarist and writer. His obituary in the *Guardian* hailed him as "a guru without self-importance, a teacher without a rule-book, a guitar-hero without hot licks and a one-man counterculture," as well as "an implacable enemy of commercialised art." He worked with artists as diverse as Cecil Taylor, Lee Konitz, Pat Metheny and Tony Williams, and his 1980 book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* established him as an authority on the subject, leading Jeremy Marre (1943–2020) to hire him as writer and presenter for the series in which this segment appeared.