Title
Improvising in a different clave: Steve Coleman and AfroCuba de Matanzas

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9n2184ws

ISBN
9780819566829

Author
Dessen, MJ

Publication Date
2004

Peer reviewed
Improvising in a Different Clave

Steve Coleman and AfroCuba de Matanzas

Let me begin by saying that, to some, my notion concerning voice as improvised music may sound on the rear of speculation, however, I am suggesting that this door for research is open. To be specific, two researchers, Mr. Walter T. Granger, a University Professor of Humanities and Psychiatry at St. Louis University in Missouri, has said: “In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose implications reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we assume.”

I then asked the last in Japan, “What was Larrie Young’s philosophy concerning improvised music?” He promptly replied, “I can’t play his philosophy.”

—Yael Lavie

Like many of the improviser-composers coming out of African-American creative traditions in the late twentieth century, Steve Coleman has been active in a wide range of cultural and musical spaces. While known mainly within the jazz world as a key member of the M Base collective, Coleman has also collaborated with musicians in Cuba, Senegal, India, Ghana, and Indonesia, worked on computer music at IRCAM, and taught through grassroot community residencies as well as in universities. In 1996, Coleman took one of his groups, the Mystic Rhythm Society, to Cuba, where they collaborated with AfroCuba de Matanzas. Led since 1991 by Francisco Zamora Chino, AfroCuba de Matanzas performs a wide range of folkloric music and dance from the main AfroCuban subcultures, including Lucumí (Yoruba), Arará (Dahomey), Abakuá and Bantu (Congolese), as well as secular rumba genres. The two groups of musicians and dancers worked together for two weeks, performing at the Havana Jazz Festival and recording a compact disc.

In this essay, I focus on this collaboration in order to develop a number
of arguments about innovative forms of contemporary improvised music and cultural practice. The first section situates the Coleman/AfroColiS project within a trajectory of musical experimentation centered on improvisation, spirituality, and intercultural dialogue, suggesting that these linked concerns form an important thread within African-American creative music traditions since the mid-twentieth century. Next, I ground these ideas in a discussion of the specific musical strategies these two groups used, drawing on both interviews and music analysis. In the final section, I explore connections between these musical methodologies and the concerns emerging in contemporary cultural studies. I argue that this kind of intercultural improvised music is itself a form of theorizing about culture.

Following Lareè’s passage above, then, this essay centers on the idea of improvised music as a form of philosophizing. In addition, both Lareè’s reference to the work of humanistic academic scholarship and his suggestion that “the door for research is open” refer to another kind of dialogue that concerns me here. Although academic scholarship on music has broadened in scope over the past decade, far less attention has been paid to the intercultural modes of experimentalism emerging in contemporary improvised music. Another central claim of this essay, then, is that this project, along with the larger tradition it references, draws on sophisticated approaches to musical improvisation in order to interrogate culture itself, resonating in this way with much of contemporary critical theory.

What, then, is this music saying? I confess to being reluctant to make definitive exegetical claims, not out of piety to poststructuralist theories of subjectivity but rather because, as a musician myself, I am acutely aware of the limitations of writing (especially mine) to encompass the richness of what I hear. Yet being a musician has also taught me the value of communicating across our differences, however imperfect and incomplete this process may be. In this spirit, this essay weaves my own hearings and interpretations with those of participants in the hope of passing through some of Lareè’s open doors and expanding the dialogic qualities of this music itself outward into broader communities.

Contexts and Histories: Spirituality, Politics, and Musical Innovation

In his liner notes to the recording of Signs and the Sun, Coleman points to the Machito–Charlie Parker recording of “Mango Mangiè” as his first exposure to African-American and Afrocolombian traditions “coming together through common roots,” explaining that the collaboration with AfroColiS de Muzamas represents his own eventual response to that “initial inspiration.” This reference comes as no surprise, as Parker’s work with Machito and Mario Bauzé, along with Dizzy Gillespie’s collaborations with Chano Pozo (discussed by Jason Stanyek earlier in this book), represented an important step in the developing dialogue between African-American and Afrocolombian traditions.

This dialogue predates the 1940s, as John Storm Roberts documents in detail, what Jolly Roll Morton called the “latin jingle” was a central influence on the development of early African-American music. Still, artistry emerging in the 1940s such as Gillespie, Pozo, Bauzé and Parker were especially significant in a number of ways. For one, their innovations were part of the broader claim neo-salsa musicians made to be taken more seriously as artists, despite the racially coded conceptions of high and low culture within the United States at the time. Part of this challenge had to do specifically with improvisation. As George Lewis argues, these musicians “created new possibilities for the construction of an African American improvisative musicality that could define itself as explicitly experimental.” (“Improvised,” 91). The fact that intercultural experiments such as Gillespie and Pozo’s were situated within this larger redefinition of improvisation, art music, and the boundaries of African-American music is extremely important because it distinguishes their work from the hybrid forms and crossover performers from the earlier decades that Roberts describes. Equally crucial was the fact that these collaborations in the 1940s embodied both a pan-African and an internationalist stance that was simultaneously musical and political (a topic that Stanyek also discusses in his essay in this volume, see chapter 1).

These collaborations reverberated in different ways over the following decades. On the one hand, many musicians continued to develop hybrid approaches that integrated African-American, Caribbean, and Brazilian musical traditions, generating a wide range of music now commonly referred to as “Latin jazz.” At the same time, however, the collaborative work of Gillespie, Bauzé, Pozo, Parker, and others in the 1940s also served as a starting point for a more explicitly experimental trajectory of intercultural improvised music. From the mid-twentieth century to the present, collaboration with musicians from other cultures and/or creative appropriation of non-Western traditions has been central to the work of numerous improvisers, including people like John Coltrane, Randy Weston, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, Yusef Lateef, DNM Cherry, Ornette Coleman, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, David Murray, Wadada Leo Smith, Jon Jang, Michele Rosewoman, Jin Hi Rain, Anthony Davis, Susie Ibarra, Steve Coleman, Anthony Brown, Glen Hurwitz, Evan Parker, and Miya Masaoka.
There is no single approach to improvised music or to intercultural collaboration shared by all of these musicians, in part since they emerged in different time periods and sociocultural environments, though the "jazz avant-garde" of the late 1920s and the 1960s, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the Asian-American improvisers community, the European improvisers network, the so-called downtown New York improvisation, and M-Base! Despite this diversity, among the diverse models of experimentation that have flowered out of the jazz tradition since the mid-twentieth century, a key area involves experimental improvisation as a basis for intercultural practice.

Spirituality is another central trope in many of these collaborations, and is particularly important in the case of Cuba. Many Cuban musicians themselves, such as Cheo Valdes and Gonzalo Rubalcaba have synthesized jazz with Afro-Cuban genres. Yet foreigners have also sought to integrate more recent developments in jazz with explicitly religious Cuban forms. Michelle Rosewoman, leader of the New York-based ensemble and one of the first North American musicians to integrate pan-African forms of jazz with Cuban folklore music, describes how she came to study Cuban music after being "touched by the spiritual aspect of the genre early in her career." Such comments are read within a larger history of discussions, long employed by musicians based in African-American music traditions, through which improvised and collaborative music making is linked with notions of universality, communicating across cultural difference, and spiritual transformation.

Yet this emphasis on spirituality and essence has often taken shape in relation to debates about low African-American music and jazz specifically—i.e., should be—situated politically. John Coltrane, for example, is one of the more prominent figures who foregrounded questions of spirituality and transcendence within the context of the extant and politically charged music world. In his famous interview with Milt Hinton, Coltrane responds to such questions in an oblique way, affirming John Coltrane's politics in some level yet unequivocally placing his music and his goals within a larger, spiritual context.28 This discursive legacy has continued to be relevant for many musicians working within the trajectory of intercultural, experimental improvised music I mentioned above. These include Asian American improvisers Jon Jang and Francis Wong, who deal with political stances in their music very multiply, and stress their discomfort with the idea of "political music" because it rarely includes spiritual concerns, a point Wong situates within a larger critique of the "separation of politics and spirituality" in the twentieth century (1997).

Similarly, both Coleman and Chirino dismissed any simple readings that would see their projects as a comment upon the political relationship between the United States and Cuba. Coleman insisted that his interest in Cuba was about spiritual traditions and that his goals had nothing to do with the problems between the United States and Cuba, which he referred to as "only obstacles" to what they were trying to accomplish. Similarly, Chirino responded to my mention of politics by saying that "a musician is not a politician...he is a musician," and stressed that musicians were important in cultural exchange but ultimately act within their own field.

However, respect for musicians' self-described goals and concepts should not blind us to the ways in which notions of spirituality and universality can obscure the power dynamics that are part of intercultural music making and that are clearly important in the case of a collaboration involving Cuban and North American musicians. Because of the U.S. embargo, Cuban musicians who chose to stay on the island after the 1959 revolution were largely cut off from the sublimar commercial opportunities that the United States represented. Although this restriction has slowly begun to change over the last decade, the legal status of the dollar in the mid-1990s and the earlier collapse of the Soviet Union created a complex dual economy in Cuba where the dollar is extremely valued compared to the peso. As a result, Cuban musicians working with North American and European groups are not only able to connect with more international infrastructure and exposure, but to work abroad to earn dollars that are extremely valuable back home. As Antion Hernandez-Regan puts it, "the introduction of market politics in Cuba) has resulted in social stratification, first and foremost within the music profession, due to its placement at the forefront of the consumer with comesational capitalism.29 Thus, regardless of the sincerity of anyone's spiritual interests, it is not difficult to imagine that many Cubans see their foreign colleagues in terms of access and that they would hesitate to criticize them openly or express a more leading role in a supposedly collaborative project for fear of losing their gig.

For this reason, I felt it important to ask Chirino about this question of agency, even though most of the tracks on this recording have author credits shared between Coleman and Chirino, and even though I suspected he would be unlikely to say anything negative about Coleman to me. When I mentioned the idea of North American jazz musicians hiring Cubans (especially percussionists) but only using them in superficial ways, Chirino recognized the tendency but emphasized that his work with Coleman was different: in fact, he proudly situated it as a historical advance in comparison to earlier periods. While he praised Cane, Peter, Machito, and the many other Cuban musicians who "invaded the United States" in the
1940s, he claimed that the Cuban percussion in those earlier collaborations was generally used "on a secondary level, [as] a background accompaniment." He distinguished his project with Coleman by emphasizing that if Afro-Cuban de Matanzas were to falter even slightly, the entire piece would fall apart, and that they were a "pirotorial part of the process, something he felt was "the opposite of the jazz that was played in the United States before, in those years." To contrast, the Coleman/Afro-Cuban project involved an entire folkloric ensemble of more than ten members performing religious and secular music from their regular repertoire; even more important, as I will discuss in the next section, this project is based less on the idea that one group should " accompany" the other than on group improvisation as a way to facilitate complex layers of multiple narratives, and on nonconventional and improvisational frameworks not limited to popular song forms. In this respect, this project—unlike most contemporary "Latin jazz"—is deeply informed by many of the experiments with more flexible, open-form improvisational structures that took place in the African-American avant-garde of the mid-to-late 1960s. A work like Coltrane's Azurion, for example, resonates with Coleman's approach here in that both link a radically heterogeneous kind of large-scale group improvisation with the notion of music as a spiritually transformative process.

This association between spirituality and more open-ended approaches to group improvisation can be traced back to even earlier innovations such as the "modal jazz" of the late 1940s and early 1950s. As Ingrid Monson argues, "Spirituals, ideas of essence, unity and transcendence served as one of several factors shaping the deepening interest of jazz musicians in non-Western religious and musical expressions," an interest that she suggests was "embodied musically in the more open forms generated by modal improvisational thinking" ("On Freedom," 1997). When I showed Coleman this comment from Monson, he more or less agreed, but extended her argument to include a broader, more mystical concept of the kind of musical making he is involved in:

Using John Coltrane as one possible example (although this issue is much more complicated than that including hundreds of other musicians) there is definitely a more consistent concern for universal principles of essence and creator being expressed in the music. However what I tell is just as important as what Coltrane and his colleagues accomplished is what they were " trying" to accomplish! What I mean by this is that creative activity you have the thing realized and the "idea" that's driving what you're doing. I am looking at that idea.

Of course Coltrane played with Diizy during and after the time when Diizy was very involved with trying to connect with a more non-European rhythmic aesthetic with his experiments with Chico Forte et al. You can also hear this direction in the experimental things that Bird did with the Modern Orchestra. Many musicians were getting inspiration from Caribbean, African, and eventually Asian sources such as India. This was on both subconscious and conscious level but think that it would be a large part of the music of different styles of music is that what I am getting at... I think what we are happening here is the slow diminution of a level of consciousness and what was happening in music, dance, literature, physics etc. is just the manifestation of these things. Where the consciousness tends to open up itself among the human race. This consciousness has a lot to do with the way we are communicating and I think that symbolic communication is at the base of it." (Email)

While Coleman is fundamentally interested in "the idea" and the transformation of consciousness he feels is at work here, he also relates it to other music to specific musical practices, especially rhythm ones. With this independence of form and content in mind, I turn now to questions of musical process in this particular project.

**Strategies and Styles of Intercultural Improvisation**

"Universal principles of essence" notwithstanding, all participants commented that the initial encounter between the two ensembles was anything but comfortable. Laia Jenius, a dancer in Coleman's ensemble, referred to the "ultimate rhythmic and cultural barriers" that the groups faced at the beginning of the project (including, I would add, a language barrier). Both Chicoé and former Afo-Cuban de Matanzas member Ramon Garci Pérez explained that while the group was very familiar with "jazz" and "Latin jazz," they recognized immediately that Coleman's musical language was altogether different from theirs. Chicoé referred repeatedly to the fact that Coleman's rhythmic practices, involving unusual rhythmic cycles and melo-
demes (for example, four, seven, eleven, and so forth), "really sounded strange to us." Similarly, the members of Coleman's group were unfamiliar with Afro-Cuban folkloric music and, according to Coleman, were speechless upon hearing Afo-Cuban de Matanzas play at the first rehearsal, in which each group performed for the other something from its standard repertoire (Coleman 2006). After their first experience, many musicians in both groups were left feeling discouraged, with doubts as to whether the project would work at all.

Gradually, though, the groups became more comfortable and developed strategies for working together. The two trailers and some of the key members of each group took more prominent roles than others, yet in the words of Yosvany Terry, a Cuban saxophonist who acted as a mediator and bridge between the two ensembles, the fact that it was "something new which was happening in that moment" meant that developing the pieces was "very collaborative," with musicians in both groups making
suggestions and remaining very attentive to what was happening. Attentiveness and careful listening was also stressed by Chirino, who pointed out that because of the strangeness of the experience, his musicians had to "put all five senses into what they were doing while maintaining a high level of concentration."

Each of the tracks the groups eventually recorded contained a religious or secular piece from the repertoire of AfroCuba de Matanzas. Simultaneously, Coleman's group added another musical layer of rhythmic cycles that, while based on the same smaller-scale rhythmic subdivisions used by AfroCuba de Matanzas, were usually structured in different lengths. As a result, the beginnings of one group's cycle did not frequently line up with those of the other, and a thick fabric of periodic patterns emerged upon which various kinds of solos and improvisations and call and response passages were layered.

Notation is a gross oversimplification here, but as an example of this technique I include in Figure 1 an approximation of selected rhythmic lines from the piece "The Metamorphosis of Amulda." Throughout this twelve-minute piece, AfroCuba de Matanzas performs a yambú, a style of rumba based on an eight-beat clave pattern (Fig. 1). This clave acts as a core around which numerous other rhythmic patterns of the same length are performed by percussionists in the Cuban ensemble. The phrase structure of the vocal call and response (inspiración y oro) that Chirino and other members of AfroCuba de Matanzas sing, is also based on phrase lengths of two bars, four bars, eight bars, and so forth.

After a twelve-second introduction by AfroCuba, Coleman's group enters and, for the rest of the piece, simultaneously performs rhythms structured around beat groupings of 5 and a half, 9, 18, and so forth (Figs. 2 and 3). Although they are working with the same underlying quarter-note pulse as AfroCuba, the cycles Coleman's group plays create a 9:8 (or 4:5:4 or 16:15) ratio with those of AfroCuba. Like the underlying yambú cycles, those of Coleman's group also exist on both smaller- and larger-scale phrase structures; some exist at the level of nine beats (such as the repeating cowbell pattern in Fig. 2) and others only repeat at larger multiples of nine beats (such as the clave-like line in Fig. 1).

As in most of the pieces on the album, these kinds of rhythmic relationships create a thick groove upon which various musical narratives enter into dialogue. This layering of different solos or call-and-response sections is often extremely dense. In another piece entitled "The Seal," for example,

the ensemble begins to increase in intensity just before the four-minute mark, at which point the rasper Kokayi (from Coleman's group) enters with freestyle vocals, alongside a chorus sung by the Cuban vocalists. The groove is augmented here by a repeated rhythmic horn line (Coleman's group), that builds further as Chirino adds solosistic calls between the choruses, and Kokayi is replaced by Coleman improvising on alto sax. By seven minutes in, these added events and the combined ensemble's responses to them—especially from the lead percussionists in each group—have changed the overall feel (as well as pitch speed) considerably from the beginning of the track. This kind of large-scale transformation is an important site for group improvisation and dialogue, as are the interactions between the different soloistic and call-and-response statements themselves on a more middle-ground level and the more microtically nuanced of the groove going on continually within and between the two groups' rhythmic sections.

In terms of how group improvisation and cultural traditions are approached, then, this music doesn't quite fit into Derek Bailey's description of "non-idiomatic" or "free" improvisation at that lacks a "commitment" to any particular idiom or style (99). As Yasunari Terao put it, "the starting point for working together was what the musicians already knew, because, I think, one can't begin working with something he doesn't know. We have to depart from somewhere." On the other hand, calling music "idiomatic" would miss the contingency of an experimental sensibility—"departing"—that is about more than simply adding one's idiom to those of another. Vijay Iyer, a pianist in Coleman's group, explained that Coleman "didn't go there to play (their music) back at them" and that "messy of AfroCuban music was not the point!"
even more specific way in which Coleman’s musical conception fit well
with that of Afro-Cuba, in that both conceived of music as fundamentista,

- something concrete.

The concept of Sev’s music is very well founded. It is founded on something. It is not that concept [of music] that rises out of nothing. So, this is something that happens of course with Cuban culture, and especially with Afro-Cuban music. That everything... has a particular function. Everything is representing an energy, representing a space, representing an entity [espiritual deities], representing something, something specific.  

- African-American traditions, while connected in complex ways to religious and spiritual functions, are not always directly and so explicitly religious in function as in the case of Afro-Cuba, a group who performs music for-and often in-ceremonial contexts. Yet Terry’s characterization here comes from the fact that Coleman has pursued his own studies of African culture and ancient civilizations and that, like many other African-American musicians, he has incorporated these directly into his conception of improvisation and compositional form. For example, in the notes to his recent recording *The Sonic Language of Myths*, he describes how the “information” on this recording “is being derived from Karenic, 1 anthropological, astronomical, and metaphysical sources, all of which are symbolized through the use of structures (forms, rhythms, and tones plus intent, emotion, and intuition) that maskarade as composition.”

- This resonance Terry points to was not lost on the members of Afro-Cuba. Sandy Pérez also suggested that although Coleman’s own esoteric studies of African culture and ancient civilizations were somewhat foreign to him, they were nonetheless similar to Pérez’s own folkloric tradition in terms of overall approach, therefore acting as an important form of connection. My impression is that this was even more the case with Chino, whose studies of the ancient history and spiritual traditions of Africa overlap in many ways with Coleman’s. The larger point here is that just as spirituality served as a driving force in the development of new models of experimental and intercultural improvised music after malagueña, the shared idea that music functions in real time to effect spiritual transformation is what creates a basis for collaborative and improvisatory practice.

Another important area that some musicians spoke of in terms of diasporean connections was that of rhythmic sensibility. Coleman described a particular "approach to [syncopated] space" that he hears in various music of Africa and of the African diaspora, though he was quick to clarify that he was not speaking about all music evenly classified as "black." His examples ranged from the music of West Africa or Afro-Cuba de Matanzas to James Brown and John Coltrane. Pérez also used the term "space" (espacio) when
describing Coleman's approach to music, stating that this is what distinguished Coleman's project from the jazz he was more familiar with. Pérez felt that this sense of space was similar to the approach to rhythm in the Matanzas region specifically, as compared to that of Havana, and that this resonated partly what gave him the "confidence" to overcome the other difficulties of working with Coleman's unusual metric structures.

Although such descriptions of rhythmic sensibility are highly subjective, I think they are worth thinking about here for a few reasons. For one, they point to a performative and improvisatory dimension of extreme importance to these musicians; namely, the nuances of rhythmic placement and articulation that make up a musician's (or group's) individual rhythmic "feel." While many factors go into establishing that feel, I think that one of the most important in this context is the use of subtle deviations in placement of rhythms against a regular pulse. Charles Kel has used the term "participatory discrepancies" to suggest that such intentional deviations against a pulse are central to the aesthetics of groove-based music (Kell and Feld, 96–108). This topic has also been explored in quantitative studies by members of the University of California, Berkeley's CNMAT research group on rhythm, including one by pianist Iyer whose dissertation refers to this technique as "expressive microtiming." Work by both Iyer and Jeff Ruins suggests that within certain African diasporic musical traditions developed extremely fine-tuned control over rhythmic deviations from a uniform pulse, and that these deviations are used in a conscious and expressive way.

Coleman's description of an African-based rhythmic "sensibility" includes not only explicitly groove-based music but also late Coltrane and Coltrane so-called free improvisation. In this sense he seems to be speaking about a broader phenomenon than these microtiming studies; at the same time, his comments are also more specific in that he, along with Pérez, seems to be referring less to the practice of microtiming generally than to a particular manifestation of it that he hears in certain players. Still, I think that these scientific studies suggest that the kind of rhythmic "sensibility" Coleman and Pérez are talking about here may indeed be a very real aesthetic resonance between the two groups, and that such studies warn us not to reduce claims like those of Coleman and Pérez to purely subjective imaginings based on racialized notions like "black rhythm." Equally important, the concept of microtiming also points to an important site for improvisation and interaction in this project. The continual negotiation between and within the two ensembles—particularly given the "complex relationship" between them rhythmically—demands a high level of sensitivity to not only macro- but microtiming. Improvisation at this level is more about what Iyer writes of as a "processual notion of communication," as a collective activity that harmonizes individuals, one that contrasts with a "telegraphic model of communication" based on "conveyance of literal, verbal meanings" (1968, 197).

This is not to say that the "telegraphic model" is not also at work in this project, rather, improvisation, agency, and intercultural contact exist not only in the more blatant, sonorous kinds of articulations here, but also on this procedural and fine-tuned microlevel of groove. I think that this kind of understanding of improvisation and interaction helps explain, for example, Chirim's reaction to my questions whether or not he had felt empowered with agency or a sense of his own "voice" in the project (see prep.)). Repeatedly, he emphasized his responsibility, as leader of AfroCuba, in maintaining the rhythmic integrity of the groove. He described this role as that of (1) preventing the overall ensemble's groove from falling apart, and (2) simultaneously maintaining AfroCuba's own particular soul along the way. Chirim, of course, improvises frequently in this music in the most solistic and explicit sense of the term as a lead vocalist for AfroCuba. Yet this sensitivity to "expressive microtiming" and emergent models of group interaction is equally central to his conception of agency and music making. Overall, then, I think we need a multilevel understanding of the role of improvisation in this project. In contrast to models of improvisation based on "freedom" from predetermined musical structures or traditions or on egalitarian social orders, improvisation here is linked closely to collaboration, from the most macrolevel of groove to the larger level where solistic articulations, contrasting rhythmic cycles, and interleaved but distinct histories continually negotiate a complex coexistence.

Playing Philosophy

Over the last few decades, both academic scholars and improvisers themselves have published work that theorizes the impact of transnational cultural formations on contemporary music practice. Yet a central point in this article is that music making can be another form of theorizing, a type of experimentalism that interrogates not only formal materials but also conceptions of culture. In this sense, I see some parallels between this kind of music practice and some of the concerns emerging in cultural theory. In his landmark essay "New Ethnomusicology," for example, Stuart Hall describes a newly emerging (in 1968) cultural politics that "has to do with the awareness of the black experience as a diaspora experience," one whose relationship to the past and "to its different 'roots' is profound, but complex" (447). He suggests that
"Here can... be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative mourning of a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present" (448). This kind of complex relationship to the past and to one another—maintaining difference while simultaneously searching for a larger level of common ground—underlies the musical strategies I discussed in the previous section.

Critical to my previous discussions, though, is the question of how such ideas are embodied in actual methods of music making. Countless musicians throughout the world would quickly echo Hall's point about tradition and the 'identities of the present.' Yet respectfully considering musicians' own views on what music making means to them does not mean taking their interpretations at face value nor ignoring what they actually do. One idea driving this article, then, is that the approach to music and sound evidenced in this project reflects a particularly deliberate and self-conscious investigation (however incomplete and imperfect) into these intracultural questions, as compared to many contemporary "world music" collaborations in the popular sphere. Consider George Lipsitz's critique of David Byrne's "Rei Momo:

When Byrne sings lyrics that describe love as "a prison in the rain" and then calls out to "my little wild thing," he has the great Cuban rumba singer Celia Cruz answer him in Yoruba as she sings "yes yere cubile." In traditional Cuban rumba, Yoruba lyrics resonate with collective memories of slavery and resistance; they render distinctly African identity back into collective national culture. But in Byrne's song, "Cuba's Yoruba passage signifies only prisoner, exodus, acculturation; it is an all-purpose "other" summoned up to symbolize Byrne's delight in musical difference on the west side of Midtown (60).

In contrast, the Yoruba (and Abakua) text and music performed by Afro-Cuba de Matanzas is not only something Coleman has studied; it represents the prime reason for his being there in the first place. More important, though, methodology reflects intention. Whereas the multirackaging environment of the studio and the musical conventions of "global pop" are adequate tools for Byrne, the kinds of improvisational processes I have been describing as part of this project come out of a more profoundly diabolic sensibility.

Using "Rei Momo" as a foil in this way does no harm describing these projects in terms of oversimplified "tropes of celebration" and "tropes of anxiety," two interrelated discourses that Steven Feld suggests have been central to how world music is "coured through the public sphere" in the late twentieth century ("Sweet Lambly"). Yet rather than idealize the Coleman/AfroCuba collaboration as a unique, transcendent communication, I simply suggest that...
The term "politics" in Half's passage brings us back to the previously cited ideas of Wong and Coltrane, who insisted on larger spiritual contexts for discussing the political dimensions of their work. One of the reasons I think the Coleman/Alto/Cuba project, as well as the larger creative music traditions it references, has particular relevance for contemporary cultural theorists is that many of these scholars also seem to be trying to carve out a broader notion of politics than the ones they inherited, broader in that its analytical scope moves beyond purely materialist paradigms. This is not to deny the urgent need to combat contemporary crises on concrete activist levels. Yet my point is that both contemporary cultural theorists and creative improvising musicians like these work within other understandings of what is political. The politics of a creative community that challenges us today also demands a transformation in how we understand ourselves and relate to one another.

Thus, while Ernhart may be right in his assessment of the global popular music he takes as his topic, I think the Coleman/Alto/Cuba collaboration points toward different kinds of "world music" happening at the margins of contemporary black music. One that is indebted to innovative African-American traditions while simultaneously a part of larger diasporic contexts. One that links sophisticated strategies of improvisation with collaboratively-structured conceptual models in order to "work with and through difference." One whose conception of experimentation is grounded within a larger understanding of music at both spiritually transformative practice and as a form of philosophizing. And one that warrants—to borrow a phrase from improvisor Paul Oliveros—"some deep listening."

Notes
1. Many thanks to the musicians and dancers who spoke with me, all of whom were exceedingly generous with their time and ideas. These include Steve Coleman, Francisco Zamora Chirino, Yossy Perry, Vique Iyer, Jaja Jenkins, and Ramon Garcia Nieves. Thanks also to the many others who offered important feedback, including Michelle Rosenwoman, George Lewis, Isgerd Monzon, Nancy Guy, Nathaniel Mackey, Wadada Leo Smith, Esteban W. Mendoza, J. D. Parr, Jerry Pasko, Anthony Davis, George Lipsite, Tristano Juls,Pearsall, Miquel site-Diaz, Doris Reay, Jason Staley, Anthony Burks, Zhudrae Yglesias, Jason Robison and Alex Lerman. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1999 Geto Jazz Festival Colloquium, the 2000 Conference International de Cultura Afeicos y Afroamericanos (Cuba), and the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.
2. M-Base was a network of musicians that emerged in Brooklyn in the 1980s and included Geri Allen, Robin Roberson, Kevin Bruce Harris, Graham Haynes, Greg Osby, Marlin Smith, and Cassandra Wilson, among others. For more, see Iyer (1999).
3. IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) is a research institute in Paris founded by Pierre Boulez.
4. Samaria is the term often used inside Cuba to refer to Yoruba-based, syncretic religious practices in the Americas, notably in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The term "Samaria" was originally derogatory and although this has changed, most Cubans still refer to this religion as Regla de Ocha (The Rule of Orisha) or La Regla Lucumí (Lucumí refers to Yoruba culture in Cuba generally. Also note that the term "Regla" has a clearer meaning for most Cubans than does its English cognate; for a taxonomy of Afro-Cuban music by a well-known Cuban musician, see Lourdes, 1994.)
5. See Roberts, Laura Iyten, 49-56.
6. In a 1994 interview, Charlie Parker is reported to have said "Man, there's no boundary line to art." (Levin and Wilson, 1994: 49.)
8. On the "intercultural free improvisations" (specifically Evan Parker), see Street 1999.
9. During the 1960s, many other North American and European musicians had followed Rosewater's lead by initiating projects that created around religious African patterns, typically Lucumí (Samari) drumming and chanting. These include Juan Bunaretto (Cuba), Nikko Yoko (Japan), Keith Amor (UK), Mark Lotts (Netherlands), Kevin Dield (USA), and Coates (UK).
10. For more on how discourses of spirituality were utilized by African-American musicians to intervene in the critical discussions surrounding their work, see Porter 2002, chapters 1 and 6, and Mommsen, "Oh Freedom."
PART THREE

SOCIAL PRACTICE AND IDENTITY