

Avant – Garde – Free Jazz

Ornette Coleman's unusual dress and hair was easily noticeable and a reason of violent racism against him in the American South during late 40's. This extra ordinary appearance meant to match with his innovative carrier in jazz music during the decades to follow.

Early evidence of musicians' intentions to break the traditional rules in jazz was shown in pianist Lennie Tristano's first experiments, during the 40's, yet, Coleman began to move forward this new style gradually, since he was in California in 50's. Those were the ages of social and political unrest and black jazz men, who were the majority of the jazz musicians of that time, were seeking for their own "black voice" in music. Within this social and artistic context, Ornette Coleman intended to move towards the primitive way of music creation by the old bluesmen. His pieces "Congeniality" and "Lonely Woman" were those that belonged to his transitional style. This style was still bebop but by omitting the piano, the instrument which provided harmony, declared his tendency to move away from the chain of the conventional and preset harmony as a base for the improvisation to be built upon. Finally, in "The Five Spot" club of New York, Coleman first presented his new style of "Free Jazz". Free Jazz contained aleatory, multi - tonality and asymmetrical rhythm. All these elements were already used in the new age avant – garde classical music but it was the first time that they were introduced in Jazz. Additionally, these elements were constantly unified in a new style, the style of free jazz.

Coleman was interested to give the musicians the opportunity during the performance, to react according to what they were hearing and not to given directions. Nonetheless, free jazz should have and had an organization in its music. "Bird Food", for example, followed an AABA form. In fact, this new style intended to set new values in music, otherwise, the absence of every parameter such as pre – written melody, form, tonal center and others, would lead to a musical result similar to the universe before the planets and the starts were formed. Until the end of the 60's, Ornette Coleman continued improving his style, exploring the

new and, the same time, remaining close to the African roots. He later attempted to compose classical music. However, maybe due to the fact that he was not a well trained classical composer, his music was not flowing naturally as his works as a sax player were. Nevertheless, with his works “The Empty Foxhole” and the “Oh Sound Gravitation”, he approached the brass and the strings in an innovative and unorthodox way.

Although many musicians rejected free jazz, others were enthusiastically attached to it. Some of his followers were John Lewis, Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Eric Dolphy and others. Cecil Taylor’s improvisations were towards the twentieth century atonality. His piano playing was percussive effected and based on texture – like development, moving away from bebop melodic approach. Taylor had the tendency to create a complexity and high organization in his music. Eric Dolphy was a talented multi – instrumentalist who grew up into bebop, however, he later improved his own style, staying away from swing and bebop feel. Albert Ayler, tenor sax player, also based his music on rhythm and melody, without pre – set harmonies. His style was mostly classical and folk and his pieces contained pre – written melodies. Also, Charles Mingus approached free jazz. For him, it was a medium through which he would refresh and enrich his music. He chose some parameters of his music to be abstract, either rhythm or improvisation. John Coltrane collaborated and accordingly influenced by Thelonious Monk, whose approach to jazz was considered unorthodox. Coltrane reached a high level of harmonic complexity with his piece “Giant Steps”, in 1959. He intensively explored new paths in music and adopted a new form of asymmetrical and irregular patterns in music. His harmonic approach was mostly cluster – chordal. Coltrane, through his way of exploring in music, reached Indian music which, similarly to other non – western music cultures, held a different philosophy from western music. The fact that John Coltrane’s works lacked a factor that would unify all the parameters in his music, led him, under the modal influence of the pianist McCoy Tyner, to develop his ideas around a tonal center which role was played by a pedal note.

Overall, free jazz brought a higher level of energy on stage. The melodies were free to be developed from their own and due to the interaction of the musicians, away from the laws of pre – set harmonies. Additionally, collective improvisation was in the foreground one more time, after New Orleans and Cool Jazz older styles. The twentieth century's new techniques that were adopted allowed jazz to align with the contemporary classical avant – garde music. Moreover, their interest to non – western music cultures indicated a new way for jazz music to follow; mixing styles foreign to jazz with jazz. Thus, one more time, musicians aimed in raising a social and political voice as a reaction to the important events during the decades of 50's, 60's and 70's and set clearly the message that their new style remained far away from entertainment and commercial exploitation. Free jazz opened a new path to the later generation of musicians to develop their musical creativity free of older, well – established values such as harmony. Unfortunately, their elitistic ideology in music that sought for highly trained audience led to a utopia where the musicians were isolated from a broader audience that was necessary to financially satisfy them.

Ioannis Papaspyrou,

April 10, 2012