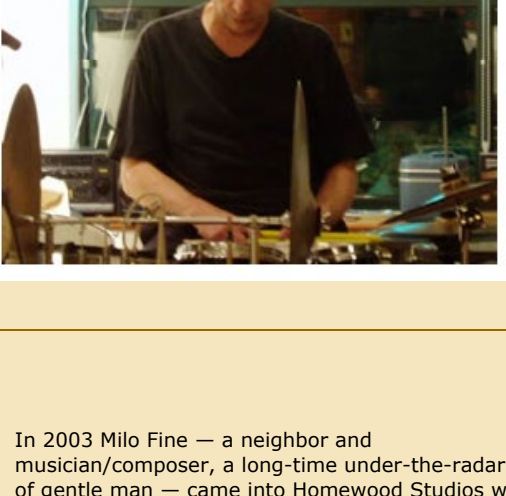
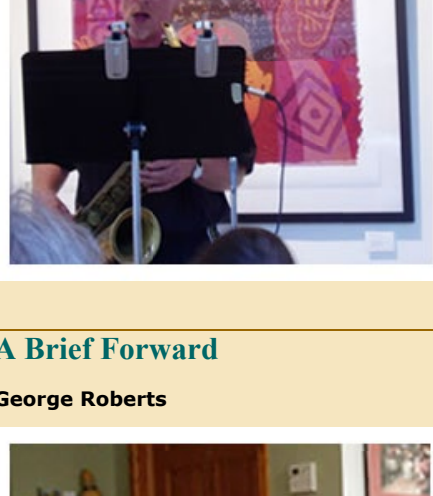
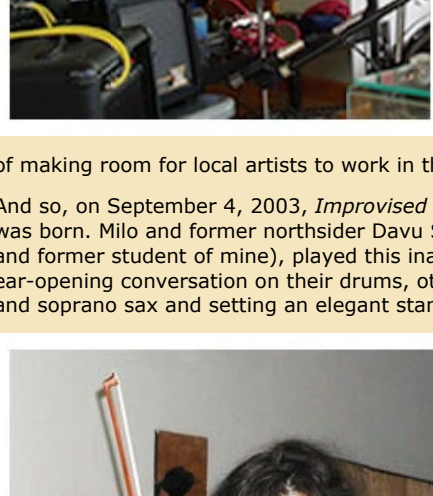


IMPROVISED MUSIC AT HOMEWOOD STUDIOS



A Brief Forward

George Roberts

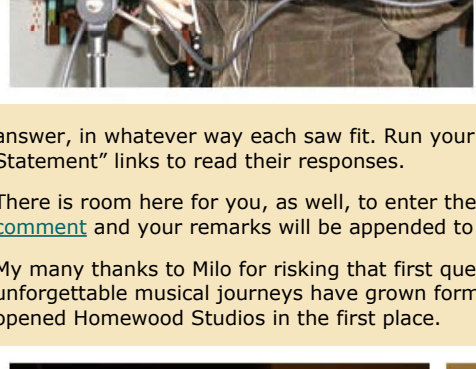


In 2003 Milo Fine — a neighbor and musician/composer, a long-time under-the-radar kind of gentle man — came into Homewood Studios with an idea. What about regular concerts by a group of his friends and fellow musicians who were all committed to exploring the whole notion of making music — a particular kind of music — together? Concerned the music industry has become corporatized, and music itself institutionalized and profit-driven, formulaic and without a clear sense of originality, these musicians seek to take themselves and their audiences in a different direction, toward an “every-moment new” experience.

There is a weekly *Homewood Tai Chi* class at Homewood Studios because a neighbor asked, once, if such a class was possible. So too the *NorthSide Writers Group*. Milo's request stepped into a growing practice

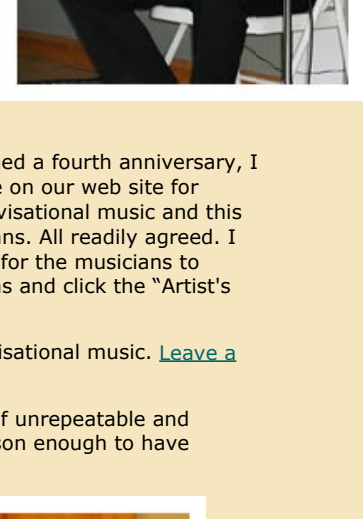
of making room for local artists to work in their own community.

And so, on September 4, 2003, *Improvised Music at Homewood Studios* was born. Milo and former northsider Davu Seru, (a North High graduate and former student of mine), played this inaugural evening — creating an ear-opening conversation on their drums, other percussion instruments and soprano sax and setting an elegant standard for evenings to follow.



Since then, a small group of committed musicians have formed a group of “regulars,” three or four of whom play on any given evening. Charles Gillett, one of those regular musicians has also taken informal photos at most of these concerts. It is those photos which accompany these texts. Our thanks to Charles for his foresight.

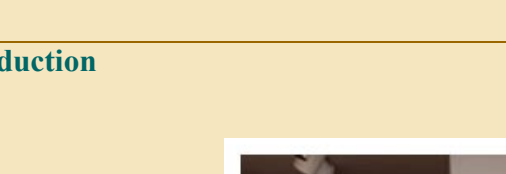
In 2007, as we approached a fourth anniversary, I proposed making a place on our web site for information about improvisational music and this group of intrepid musicians. All readily agreed. I proposed four questions for the musicians to



answer, in whatever way each saw fit. Run your cursor over the photographs and click the “Artist's Statement” links to read their responses.

There is room here for you, as well, to enter the conversation about improvisational music. [Leave a comment](#) and your remarks will be appended to this page.

My many thanks to Milo for risking that first question. Six evenings a year of unrepeatable and unforgettable musical journeys have grown from that courage. For me, reason enough to have opened Homewood Studios in the first place.

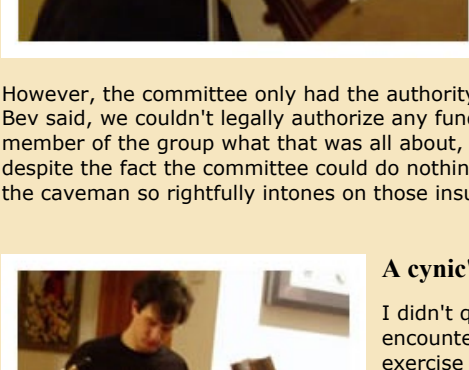
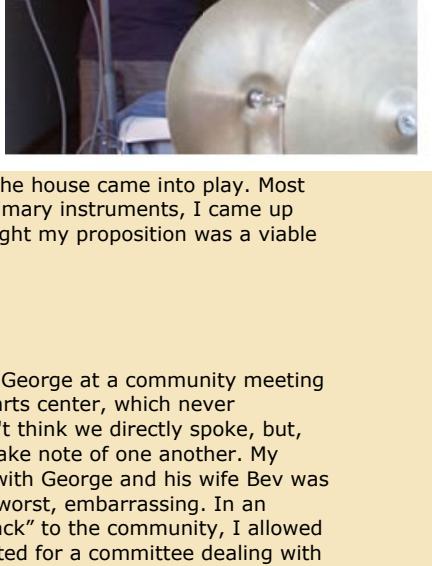


IMPROVISED MUSIC, An Introduction

Milo Fine

It's always something; or, necessity is a mother...

Two circumstances precipitated my approaching George Roberts about the possibility of presenting concerts at Homewood Studios. As has often been the case, the West Bank School of Music, where the Milo Fine Free Jazz Ensemble has held forth the first Friday, every other month since 1983, seemed to be teetering on the edge of collapse in 2003. (Having begun practicing self-determination in 1970, the School was the sixth venue I had utilized in these efforts, which are integral to the development of my work.) Not wanting to have to scramble at the last minute should the worst possible scenario come to pass, I remembered an article about Homewood Studios in the NorthNews. Ah, how wonderful would that be; to present my work in a venue less than a mile from my home; and be able to share it with the immediate community (regardless of their overt interest). And this is where my having to remove an old piano from the house came into play. Most likely Homewood wouldn't have a piano, and being it is one of my primary instruments, I came up with the idea of offering it as a gift to Homewood. So, if George thought my proposition was a viable one, I would at least be bringing something to the table.



Backing up.

I first encountered George at a community meeting about a northside arts center, which never materialized. I don't think we directly spoke, but, we did, I believe, take note of one another. My second encounter with George and his wife Bev was at best absurd; at worst, embarrassing. In an attempt to “give back” to the community, I allowed myself to be recruited for a committee dealing with housing issues. Not surprisingly, my stance in support of neighborhood stabilization almost always put me at odds with the rest of the committees' agenda of neighborhood gentrification. In the midst of this came the Roberts', looking for money to help in the establishment of Homewood Studios.

However, the committee only had the authority to fund housing projects. No matter what George and Bev said, we couldn't legally authorize any funds whatsoever. So, after they left, I asked another member of the group what that was all about, and was met with a statement to the effect that, despite the fact the committee could do nothing for them, they had a right to present their case. As the caveman so rightfully intones on those insurance commercials, “Uh, what?!”



A cynic's assessment.

I didn't quite know what to make of George in these encounters. While Bev did almost all of the talking at the latter exercise in futility, he made an earnest presentation at the earlier arts center meeting. But experience has shown me time and again that the agendas behind earnestness, particularly when it came to establishing a center or organization, were all too often painfully self-serving; mirroring the grab for power and control one readily sees in business, religion and government.

A cynic's reassessment.

But given the circumstances, and despite my characteristic ambivalence (about almost everything) I contacted George and arranged a meeting. Within minutes of our shaking hands and sitting down at Homewood Studios, any doubts I had regarding his earnestness evaporated. Seldom have I encountered such a difficult, awkward situation almost effortless. Additionally, he seemed to almost immediately grasp what I was on about, the good, the bad & the ugly. To wit, he couldn't use the piano -- there was simply no room. But he was interested in starting a concert series. And thus, *Improvised Music at Homewood Studios*, the second Monday every other month, was born, and, as the hoary old cliché goes, we haven't looked back.



Working.

The series has allowed me to regularly engage diverse groups of highly creative musicians in spontaneous public discourse. Most of these groupings would not have had a forum were it not for Homewood Studios; this wonderful music would never have been realized. The room itself, the “feel” of the gallery is something quite special. Certainly, as an improviser, it is incumbent upon me to use any environment to my “advantage,” as an elemental catalyst for creation. More often than not, this involves working “against” (or in spite of) the venue. Not so with Homewood Studios. The respect accorded the musicians and the music is palpable. And, almost to a person, everyone who has been part of the series has commented on the overall feel of the space, to say nothing of the resplendent acoustics. And, for me, there is the sense of quiet satisfaction I get from presenting my work in the community where I live, as the floor-to-ceiling windows

allow passersby on the relatively busy Plymouth Avenue to catch a glimpse of this music. Never mind almost no one is interested or curious enough to come in. It is enough that we do the work. The work speaks and is heard regardless of whether or not anyone is actually listening.

Dangling bit.

By the way, the West Bank School of Music weathered the storm of 2003, and seems to be on somewhat solid footing as of this writing. So the *Milo Fine Free Jazz Ensemble* continues its explorations there, alternating months with the series at Homewood Studios.

And, of course.

George & Bev: Thank you yet again and again and again. Onward...

About the Musicians

To learn more about the musicians depicted on this page, see the following artist statements.

- [Scott Newell](#)
- [Milo Fine](#)
- [Viv Corringham](#)
- [Stefan Kac](#)
- [Wendy Ultan](#)
- [Davu Seru](#)
- [John O'Brien](#)
- [Anthony Cox](#)
- [Charles Gillett](#)
- [Steve Gnitka](#)

Photos by Charles Gillett, Amy Myrbo, and George Roberts.



HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The vision for Homewood Studios has its roots in the late sixties and early seventies, in a North Minneapolis neighborhood called Homewood. At that time several young families, all committed to values of diversity, social justice and community activism, began buying homes here. The neighborhood had been depressed, many of the homes were dilapidated or abandoned, but they were built in the early part of this century and were big, well-made, elegantly designed structures, and they were relatively inexpensive because of the reputation of the area. These teachers, attorneys, architects and artists, professional people and their families, were not particularly interested in the American Dream of the suburbs an earlier generation had pursued but rather were inclined to create a vital and nurturing community in an urban landscape.

The earlier history of this neighborhood includes a period around 1908 to 1920 when Jewish and African-American people were excluded by covenant from purchasing homes in this development. Stone markers were erected at the corners of this eighty-acre plot of land to indicate its exclusivity. In short, Homewood was an early version of the gated community. Because these large and beautiful homes were "out in the country" back then, not many of the targeted wealthy Scandinavian merchants responded by purchasing homes here. The covenant against Jewish people was lifted and the homes sold well until the development was full. The neighborhood remained predominantly Jewish in nature and culture well into the fifties and early sixties. During this time a bustling business district, including the Homewood Theater, the Homewood Market, the Homewood Hospital and the Homewood Bowling Alley thrived. North High School was one of the centers of social and cultural activity and produced graduates such as Harrison Salisbury (Pulitzer prize winning author) and the Andrews Sisters.

Then, in the early sixties, the lure of the suburbs attracted many of the Homewood residents and a general exodus occurred, producing the pattern of events familiar in large cities around the country. Homes that had been in families for generations were put up for rent. Less stable populations of residents moved in and out much more frequently. City and community resources were diverted to other areas. What was once one of the more affluent and desirable areas of the city sank into disrepute and disrepair.

Thirty years later, our neighborhood in the heart of a major city, began to give birth to a new definition of the American Dream. This renaissance, fueled by the counterculture values of the sixties which have remained largely intact here, has taken on several projects - including the restoration of the stone markers, now dedicated to inclusivity rather than to exclusivity - and have most recently embarked on an ambitious commercial/economic development plan for four blocks along our "main" street - Plymouth Avenue.

Homewood Studios is the first of these restoration projects. A wonderful old brick building, abandoned in the late eighties, has been renovated and turned into five work space studios for community artists and a community gallery/meeting place. A back yard sculpture and flower garden provides a place for community residents and studio artists to meet informally, for local children to get to know the artists. Right next door, another old building has undergone a similar process and has become Plymouth Avenue Art Studio, owned by local jeweler and sculptor (as well as elementary school art teacher) Shirley Jones. Other initiatives currently include eight live-work spaces for artists and plans to convert the old Lutheran church / synagogue / Baptist church across the street into a dual museum —housing artifacts of local Jewish history and a museum of civil rights.

Asian Media Access, a non-profit dedicated to teaching teens how to use video and audio documentary techniques to address social issues, purchased the old Salvation Army building on the block and renovations are under way.

All of these plans, visions and activities grow out of the dreams and desires of our neighbors, (many of whom have lived here now for thirty-five or forty years), for our little corner of the planet to be regarded as a safe, creative, desirable and healthy place to live and work and grow. All of the plans for change and development are neighborhood driven, with city agencies becoming willing and excited partners as the process has entered funding and building phases.

Since opening in December 1999, Homewood Studios has averaged twelve to fifteen gallery shows a year, focusing on the work of local artists, including African-American and Hmong artists. In 2007 [Gallery 1x1x0ne](#), a space dedicated to children's art was opened.

DEVELOPER'S STATEMENT

Delivered to the City Planning Commission on Tuesday, January 20, 1998 during our zoning hearing.

I have been a resident of Homewood, in North Minneapolis, since the fall of 1970. I have been a teacher of English and writing at North Community High School, ten blocks from my home, since 1974. During all this time I have been developing as an artist, poet and printer, and have viewed all these activities as "my work."

My family life, my teaching life and my artistic life are all bound irrevocably to my neighborhood, Homewood, which has a diverse and interesting history and which has undergone considerable change for the better since I first moved in. I live two blocks from the building I want to purchase and develop as Homewood Studios.

I view art as a primary way to build community and to enhance my neighborhood. A plethora of accomplished artists of all kinds are my neighbors, and we have no gathering place, no venue where our collective energies can coalesce, no place where one plus one might begin to equal three.

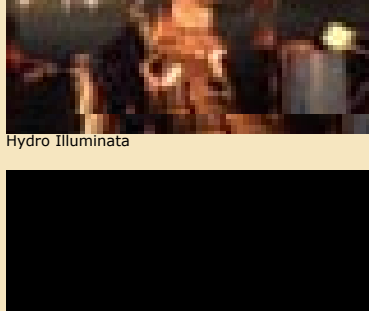
It is my hope to create a nexus point in my neighborhood where art and artists, friends and neighbors, students and teachers, children and adults can find nurture and where they might fulfill themselves and their community.

I view this building, 2400 Plymouth Avenue, as an addition to my home, as an extension of my classroom. And I view this enterprise, the opening of Homewood Studios, as the first step in revitalizing an entire commercial block, and thereby the aspirations and nascent visions of our entire community.

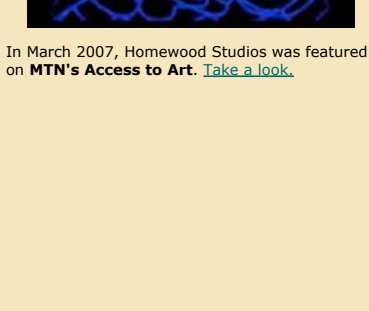
About Homewood Studios

- [History and Background](#)
- [Studio / Gallery / Meeting Space Rental Information](#)
- [Announcement Mailings](#)
- [Links of Interest](#)
- [How to Find Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Other Info About Homewood Studios



Hydro Illuminata



In March 2007, Homewood Studios was featured on [MTN's Access to Art](#). [Take a look.](#)

Scott C. Newell

In 1969 (sixteen years old) I used to go into Shoppers City in Maplewood and stare at a copy of "Nothing Is" by Sun Ra, in their music department. There was something troubling about it. So instead I purchased the first Tony Williams Lifetime record, (the one with Spectrum Road). The next week, I went back for the Sun Ra platter! By the fall of 1970 I was regularly checking out "Blue Freedoms New Art Transformation". I had been playing guitar for a short bit and now my interests were turning from rock music to jazz and improvisation. This period also saw the formation of my first band "Reykjavik Gold" and a continuum of musical exploration. The chance to see, hear, and get to know, Milo Fine, Joe Smith, and Richard Barbeau was invaluable, as they were examples of the complexity and variety of issues improvised music, or music in general, presented. In particular, Milo Fine was very encouraging and provided many of my first and subsequent performance opportunities. Also of import to me, was a period from the early 1970's to the late 1970's that I was employed as "The Record Dude" at 3 Acre Wood Records in downtown St. Paul. This place served as a laboratory / think tank for discussion and meeting people of musical interest.

I'm interested in methodology and suspicious of it at the same time. There is a great deal of disrespect shown towards improvisation, to be sure. But then how much do people in general know about the inner workings of other musics? Not much, I think. So to me, what is important about music, is the content. The science, form, politics, spirit worlds of music are all important. It's one big kettle of conundrums if you ask me, and that's where a lot of the fun comes in! The real problem for me, is style.

When people listen to music, they have a hard time separating the "name" of what they're hearing from the actual sounds. The way people look, their reputations, status of venue – all are huge factors in how people hear music. This will sound preposterous, but I believe that often the same fractals and ingredients occur over and over again in music. This makes the listeners job difficult. Then, the safe fall back position is, the slavery of "style". I don't really have any advice about how to listen to "this" music ... just good luck, and I'm sure it will work out one way or another.

Here's my dang deal. I've been working on the integration of composition and improvisation through the use of a self invented notational system of numerically based and visually driven structures. Vocal call and response, language subtexts, permutations, serial music, a variety of tried and semi-true methods, to be used in both open and closed contexts.

an after thought

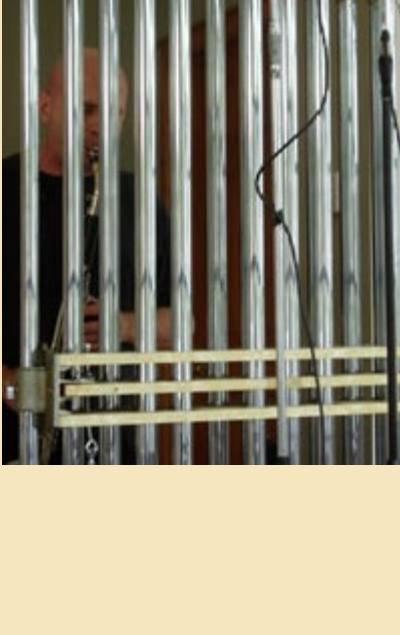
I wanted to address what might be the obvious, about the appeal of open improvisation to the player. You get to have a real say in what the form of the music will be. You can attempt to set a direction, support, color ,add, subtract, impede, assassinate, in short, your opinion counts as far as your ability and cohorts will allow. This area should also hold some interest for the listener. The listener can try and figure out how is this "thing" functioning? Personality dynamics, what is the mood or vibe, shapes, independent directions, thematic materials, are all things to listen for. Of course, "the old reliable" just let go of your thoughts and drift is a "good one" always.

This isn't much to go by, but there it is.



Milo Fine

www.fetik3.com/milofine/



☐ Close Window

Viv Corringham – Vocals

Website: <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/vivdc/>

I started making improvised music around 1978, after moving to London. Music had always been important to me, and throughout my art school years I'd sung various kinds of material but most of it seemed unsatisfying. One night in London I went to a concert by Mike Cooper, who I'd previously heard play blues in my hometown of Lincoln. To my surprise he was playing the guitar strings with a fan, making sounds with balloons and bouncing ping-pong balls on the guitar.

This was my first experience of improvised music and after my initial shock I was very curious about it. When I asked Mike to explain, he just said: "Try it!" and so, a few weeks later, I did my first improvised music gig, with him, a dancer and sax player Lol Coxhill.

Improvised music can be scary to perform. You start a gig with nothing, knowing things can go horribly wrong and there is nowhere to hide. Yet at its best the music can be sublime and could never have happened without taking that risk.

Improvisation is inclusive; performers from different areas of music, with or without training, can work together to create something truly of this moment and this place. In his classic book *Improvisation*, the late guitarist Derek Bailey wrote: *Improvisation can be considered as a celebration of the moment*. Concentration is essential, to follow what you are playing and what everyone else is doing and to reach that state of being fully present, where the group is not a collection of egos pulling in different directions but a unity that creates something larger than the sum of its parts.

My performances explore the possibilities of the voice - a basic, readily available and very flexible instrument. Central to the improvisation is listening - to my own and other musicians' sounds and to the sound of the environment where we are playing. As soon as I lose this focus, I notice lazy responses creeping in: familiar sounds from my "repertoire," staying too long in a comfortable area, or else jumping restlessly from one thing to another.

I am trying to find a way of staying relaxed and open to the music as I play, without pushing it in any particular direction. My aim is for the music to surprise me and to relate specifically to this particular meeting of musicians in this context.

I hope the audience leaves their baggage at the door. Expectations and preconceptions can really hinder listening. I like those audiences who meet the players halfway, bringing the same concentration and openness we try for. It can be hard - this music often isn't easy listening. An attentive audience will be aware of times when we struggle and how we resolve it, and will take pleasure, as the performers do, in those moments when the music seems to just play itself. Improvisation is a cooperative, collaborative process and I think that includes audience as well as players.



Stefan Kac

How did you find your way to making this kind of music? i.e. not only who were your influences, but what other aspects of thinking about the role of art in your life came into play?

I was first introduced to the concept of improvisation when I began to develop an interest in jazz. I've never stopped playing jazz, but it has also led me down a number of other interesting paths, this being one of them. Of course, in the 1960's, jazz musicians developed their own "free jazz" idiom, but I actually began playing improvised music with very little knowledge of this (or any other) improvised music tradition, which means that so far, my most important influences have been the other musicians I have worked with.

What is it you feel distinguishes improvised music from other forms of music?

Obviously, for the creators, the process is different, but as a listener, I've never felt that I needed to approach this music all that differently from anything else. I once read a statement that most improvised music can't compete with the very best notated music for quality. Talk about stacking the deck! Comparing only the very best of one with the cumulative content of the other is a skewed way of thinking about it. The improvised music I play deals with melody, harmony, rhythm, form, and so on; it's just that there are different possibilities available, and that once a choice is made, there's no opportunity for revision. It's a high-risk, high-reward proposition, and one where the possibilities are not necessarily better or worse, just different.

Is there a particular BIG question you are investigating with your music?

Colloquially, we tend to refer to "understanding" a given piece of music, but is that really the right way to put it? I think that term is a remnant of past eras where a common practice prevailed to such a great extent that there was not only a correct way to make music, but consequently a correct way to listen to it also. Rather than educating diverse perspectives into conformity, I think we ought to embrace them all and allow the music to speak for itself "as music" to each individual listener, even if that means (as it does for me and my ilk) that the audience is often small. By calling it "understanding," a hierarchy is created by which one can supposedly objectively identify those who "get it" and those who don't. That, to me, is not how music should work; the alternative is a bit nihilistic ("let the chips fall where they may"), but also more honest.

How do you want audience members to listen when you perform?

Be detail-oriented listeners, but don't try to find anything in the music that is not there.

My personal website is <http://www.stefankac.com>. I also have a blog (where one can find even more philosophical rambling) located at <http://fickleears.blogspot.com>.





Davu Seru

How did you find your way to making this kind of music? i.e. not only who were your influences, but what other aspects of thinking about the role of art in your life came into play?

Any art form I've ever felt drawn to includes elements of freedom and, yeah, control; I don't think of the two as mutually exclusive. That said I'm a jazz drummer and improvising musician. Jazz has been my way to free-improvisation (FI). FI has made me a better listener. Good listeners are essential to jazz.

What is it you feel distinguishes improvised music from other forms of music?

While underlying both is this assumption there's value in democracy, I still think about the two forms as distinct: jazz cultural commitments have been to the scalar melodic theme, supported by "vertical" harmony, a love of fractions, and swung rhythm. FI is as much freedom-from these things as it is freedom-to.

Outside of this, I don't know. What's most important for me in FI is the challenge set forth once I've entered a space, noisemaker in tow, and with time to fill. And in terms of anything approaching doctrine: to avoid wasting time (the audience's and my own), that big interval between coming and going ought to be treated with a bit of discipline.



JOHN O’BRIEN – Trumpet, Flugelhorn

It’s easy to talk about how I got started in creative music but not so easy to answer this question [How did you find your way to making this kind of music?] with any degree of certainty. I met Bill Dixon when I was in Madison in the 1970s. We enjoyed an easy friendship right off and I became a willing student of his learning everything I could and taking large steps to change my technical way of playing the horn and so on. I remember, though, having experiences with creative music sometime before I had even known about it in any context. I used to "interpret" people and their vibe with my horn bending notes and making the "non-musical" sounds people still have so much trouble listening to. In any case, when I met Bill I was prepared to get busy with the music right away.

As I began to grow and change musically I found that I was interested in shapes that were authentically my own — they differed from those of Dixon and Miles (my other great influence). More recently I've gotten involved in the world of video production and have edited and produced a number of films concerning the Hmong peoples' experience immigrating to America. In the most recent of these I've worked with Hmong indigenous musics and found to my great surprise the shapes used by traditional Hmong flute, multi-reed players and vocalists most resemble the shapes I referred to above.

"So go figure!" as my mother used to say.

I play the horn to find, as Bill used to put it, "absolute freedom for the improvisor." But I am not particularly involved in the tradition of any music per se. I don't know who's who any more and I'm not interested in being well known for any reason, including for my musical accomplishments. But I am interested in playing and seeking that freedom Bill mentions.

Ellington, when asked to name his favorite piece from the thousands he made up responded, "the next one." In the same vein: I was watching an interview with Danny Boyle, the director of *Trainspotting*, *28 Days Later* and *Shallow Grave* and he said the best film a director makes is usually his first one because, "he doesn't know what he's doing." Important: that is **not** to say he is incapable of doing it. It's just that he's never done it before. The director improvises.

We tend to think of competence as a re-do effort. Something proven and measurable and therefore something fitting nicely into the streams of commerce and industry where people who risk hate risk.

In improvisation we always try to do the next thing. We may start someplace familiar but its not where we want to be. As musicians dedicated to such a process, we are very, very different from the norm and hence without much opportunity or recognition especially, I suppose, in such an "outpost" as Minneapolis.

The freedom I seek as a player is close to the tradition of Jazz, of Black American Music but it shares mostly this objective, I think, and not many of its traditional means. Sidney Bechet said Jazz (which, I read, comes from a Yoruban word/concept meaning to discover something and explore it) was invented by the first generation of Black men born after the emancipation of the slaves. He believed being "told you are 'free'" led to the investigation of what freedom was actually about - what it meant and for him and a lot of other New Orleans players it meant "Jass."

All this is what the music has basically meant to me especially in my work with Milo Fine at Homewood Studios. Playing there makes a piece of art of one's self encased - as we always are - in a glass box in the middle of the city. In a way, as the improvisor is physically transformed from one of his/her forms into another, it is entirely appropriate a place to play and thus to be "showcased."



