

Henry Threadgill's Zooid
An Examination of Form and Process

by

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Abstract

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Henry Threadgill has led many innovative bands over the years. His current band, Zooid, represents a culmination of decades of his musical process as a composer. Although Threadgill's music has been praised and applauded, his compositional process has been an enigma.

This thesis will closely examine Henry Threadgill's evolving techniques as a composer and examine how his music exemplifies a jazz tradition that challenges the paradigm of jazz being simply a genre of music. Jazz is also a process. It is a synthesis of elements from many different cultures. Threadgill's music incorporates musical concepts that come from Europe, Africa, India, Cuba and elsewhere. In addition, with Threadgill's Zooid music, form itself becomes a process of investigation and experimentation.

By examining Threadgill's intervallic language, his use of modular form and perception of metric rhythm, my goal is to help grow appreciation for one of America's jazz masters.

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Dr. Lewis Porter

"After the Big Band Era, we lost out on the expansion of form. Bop scaled the music down to smaller forms and in the 1960's, it got down to just a note or two. But I've always been interested in having improvised and written music go hand in hand, tune after tune, another 32-bar tune with solos just doesn't work for me." - Henry Threadgill ¹

"There's a lingering oversimplified view of avant-garde jazz as wholly off-the cuff, by definition, unrehearsed. Yet, the one time performed, '*Front Piece*' required seventeen rehearsals." - David Adler ²

"It's African-based to me, independence of parts." - Henry Threadgill ³

"Alternate notation, serial techniques, and experimental form all have a long history in both the jazz and classical avant-gardes, but Threadgill has put them to distinctly personal use. As much as he respects and studies classical tradition, he flatly states, 'I don't play European music. I write instrumental music, not orchestra music or chamber music. I don't use those forms. I don't imitate anything and I don't use any of those processes. I have another way of advancing my information.'" -David Adler ⁴

"Now with Zooid form is a process with me." - Henry Threadgill ⁵

Preface

Henry Threadgill has written hundreds of compositions in his prolific career. These compositions range from theater and film compositions and small ensemble music that was composed for the A.A.C.M. ensemble A.I.R., to the large scale structures such as his composition *Run Silent, Run Deep, Run Loud, Run High* that he wrote for The Brooklyn Academy of Music's New Wave Festival, but perhaps his most ambitious music to date is the music he has written for his current ensemble Zooid.

Although there has been some discussion and curiosity about Zooid's intervalic harmonic system and the rhythmic complexity of the music, very little analysis or academic research has been done on his compositions. Analyzing Threadgill's music presents many challenges which perhaps is why little research has been done to date.

In jazz academia, analyzing a composition frequently involves comparing a score or chart to a recorded performance. This is challenging with Threadgill because Threadgill's music is not a written score. It involves a process. With Threadgill, the form is not fixed. He consistently re-arranges his material making it hard to follow a score. These arrangements are not written down, but instead, they are internalized by intensive rehearsals.

In addition, the complexity of Threadgill's music can be daunting. Threadgill does not use the major/minor system. He has developed his own

system that is based on intervallic relationships within three note cells.

Rhythmically, Threadgill often disguises the downbeat and he typically changes time signatures every measure. Furthermore, the drummers' metric form of a composition is sometimes independent from the rest of the band. Mr. Threadgill is an engaging individual, but he does not often discuss the details behind his compositional process. When he does on occasion briefly talk about his musical system, because of its complexity and intricacy, it often comes across as being ambiguous.⁶

With these challenges to overcome, I found that the best tactic for gaining further insight into his system was to interview the many outstanding musicians who have played in Zooid.

I believe there are 8 characteristics that help define Threadgill's music with Zooid.

1. Expansion
2. Three-note Cells
3. An Intervallic System for Improvisation
4. Modular Form
5. Retrograde Harmonic Motion
6. Elimination of the Downbeat
7. Rhythmically Independent Phrasing
8. Rhythmic Manipulation

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Table of Contents

Abstract:	ii
Preface:	iv
Acknowledgements:	vi
Chapter 1: The Jazz Tradition	1
The Rhythm	4
The Blues	7
Composition	9
Collective Improvisation	10
Chapter 2: Threadgill's Early and Life Influence	12
Chapter 3: The Birth of Zooid	19
Chapter 4: An Analysis of <i>See The Blackbird Now</i>	30
Expansion of Form	31
The Intervallic Language	32
The Operation	37
Modular Form and Retrograde Motion	57
Elimination of the Downbeat	66
Rhythmic Manipulation	70
Chapter 5: Interviews	
Brandon Ross	72
Christopher Hoffman	83

	Elliot Humberto Kavee	96
	Liberty Ellman	120
	Stomu Takeishi	170
Chapter 6:	Conclusion	177
Notes:		178
Discography:		182
Bibliography:		183

Chapter 1

The Jazz Tradition

Before analyzing Threadgill's music, it is applicable to examine how his music fits within the jazz tradition. Threadgill has stated that although he is influenced by jazz, he does not consider the music he plays "jazz." He prefers the term "creative improvised music."

So, back to that question. Yes, I support the idea, like people should learn everything they can about it. I think they spend too much time worrying about jazz. I think that's a very bad mistake. I don't think they really need to teach jazz. I think they need to teach music. I think that the more serious problem in teaching jazz is that they made it small. They pin holed it, made it very small and they qualified what they think jazz is.

They don't teach anything about what I do. They don't teach anything about what Cecil Taylor does. So what are they teaching? They've excluded so many people in the educational process, so what does that say about teaching this? See, if you're gonna teach Bach, you have to teach Wagner. If you're gonna teach Wagner, you have to teach Schoenberg. If you teach Schoenberg, then you're gonna have to teach Stravinsky, Varèse or anybody else. You can't exclude.

In these jazz programs, they exclude. So what is a student going to learn? A student is being fashioned and molded a certain way, rather than being exposed to the entire musical palette in so-called 'improvised music.' And I do not really like the word 'jazz.' I prefer 'creative improvised music' because there is confusion about what jazz means now. I think it has lost its meaning and I do not think that word is relevant anymore because there's too much confusion.

I just ordered a macchiato and she knew exactly what to bring me. There's a basketball team named 'Jazz,' perfume named 'Jazz,' a festival named 'Jazz' and there is not one person on there that is improvising. Everybody is a pop group, a rock group or some kind of quasi-something group, you know what I am saying? It is just too much confusion.

Then people make films and documentaries, like Ken Burns for one. He and the people who were his consultants give a picture of what they say 'jazz' is and then exclude generations of people. Whole schools and generations of people are excluded from it and it is played nationally and internationally and it is supposed to be giving an idea of what 'jazz' is. So that is why I say that word has really lost its meaning.¹

Despite Threadgill's assertion, a strong case can be made that not only does

Threadgill's music fall within the framework of the jazz tradition, in some ways, it exemplifies it.

The problem with the term "creative improvised music" is that it includes music from multiple musical traditions. Indian-improvised music, African-improvised music and European-improvised music are all very creative forms of music. What makes jazz unique is that although from its very inception it included multiple musical influences, it was synthesized through the African-American experience. At the turn of the century, New Orleans was a mixture of many different cultures, backgrounds and races. African-Americans had to adjust to a new environment that included Irish, Italian, German, Spanish and British immigrants along with Creole and Caribbean immigrants from Cuba, Argentina and Haiti.

The types of music heard in New Orleans at the turn of the century ranged from parade bands, European dance bands, and brass ensembles to Tango and Cuban dance music. African-Americans were stripped of both their music and culture and as a result, they assimilated what they saw and reassembled it into something new.

And see, all of this comes from black music. Black music is the result of an interchange between African music and the music from the rest of the world. Not just European music, all music. Wherever there's another culture that the African descendants who came to this country came in contact with, that culture becomes part of the language. The language that the African descendants have, they don't anymore. They lost that when they came here. So, they set up a new language. This new language has been created out of bits and pieces of everything. So that's an important aspect of jazz that nobody talks about. Now when you understand that principle, you should understand that you need to be studying all music and all people and all things, not just this particular genre of music. It is inconsistent with the whole history of it.²

In thinking this way, jazz music becomes not simply a genera of music but a process. It is not something that is confined.

Threadgill's Zooid music follows this same construct. Some of the techniques Threadgill utilizes come from the European classical world, such as his use of modular form and three note tri-chords. Other parts come from Africa, such as his elimination of the downbeat and rhythmically independent phrasing. Some of it comes from China and the Middle East, such as his use of the pipa and oud. Threadgill has consistently reinvented his music, whether it is by changing instrumentation or by incorporating new harmonic structures.

When examining the jazz tradition, at times critics and writers like to emphasize certain traits being more significant than others. Critics like Stanley Crouch have questioned whether or not avant-garde jazz music falls within the jazz tradition.

You see, when we hear Duke Ellington playing with Coltrane, we realize that the music is a certain tradition, based in blues and swing. Those elements provide bridges between schools and styles. Look, Cecil Taylor is far too intelligent a guy to totally copy anybody. He's not just an intelligent guy. He's some kind of genius who has many original thoughts about many, many things. But, the sound of his music is not jazz. It is something else and it is based in European music. I don't think he has influenced any real jazz today, either. That's why he and all of those other guys used to call what they do "black music." They knew it wasn't jazz, although that rhetoric has changed over the years.³

I agree with Mr. Crouch that jazz does indeed have a tradition, but when dealing with the jazz tradition, it can becomes problematic to pick and choose which characteristics have the most significance. Yes, blues and swing are important to jazz music but so is innovation, composition and improvisation.

Perhaps emphasizing the blues and swing elements of jazz is a way to help preserve and recognize its African-American roots. However, in doing so, it makes the assumption that other traits such as composition and innovation are not as significant. Jazz has a tradition of innovation from its very inception and Threadgill's music is part of that tradition. It is not a coincidence that many of jazz music's most celebrated icons like Armstrong, Ellington, Monk, and Bird, were also musical innovators. In fact, innovation has always been an important part of the African-American experience. Carlye Fielding Stewart has explained the role of innovation in black society in her book *Soul Survivors*.

Blacks could not have survived without being innovative, without creating something new and vital in a world that had virtually lost all meaning. Innovation is not only manifested in the cultural folkways and mores of black people, but also in the walk, talk, styles of dress, culture, music literature, and food of black people. Every aspect of black life exudes some dimensions of innovation that distinguish black culture from other cultural idioms. African - Americans have lived innovatively and creatively out of necessity, and possessing the ability to live in such a manner has been a significant element of black freedom in America.⁴

There has been a lot of focus put on the European influences that are in Threadgill's Zooid compositions, but many of the concepts Threadgill utilizes with Zooid are African in origin.

The Rhythm

When examining the swing rhythm of jazz, it is educative to analyze not just the rhythm itself but also the function the rhythm has within an ensemble. If a bass player plays the swing rhythm in unison with a drummer, the music does not have the same feeling. The bass player needs to be walking the bass in contrast with the swing rhythm. It is this contrast of rhythms that helps create the feeling

of swing. Rhythmic independence and jazz music's poly-rhythmic nature are parts of the jazz tradition that need further investigation.

Jazz scholar, Gunther Schuller, has acknowledged A.M. Jones theory in his landmark book *Early Jazz*, that African phrases are built up of the numbers two and three or a combination of two and three and that the ragtime rhythm again demonstrates the Africa American's urge to combine two rhythms simultaneously within the European musical framework.⁵

Rhythmic, melodic and harmonic independence are the foundation of Threadgill's system. Not only are the instruments rhythmically independent from the drums, they are often independent from one another. Rhythmic independence is a neglected but vital attribute of the jazz tradition. Many early stride pianists like James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" Smith, and Fats Waller incorporated complex poly-rhythmic rhythms with their left hands. This typically involved some combination of phrasing in three in conjunction with phrasing in four with the right hand. Henry Martin has investigated this phenomenon.

One of the ways in which Johnson extended ragtime technique was in the treatment of the left hand, which in stride can be represented as 1-2-1-2 with 1 as bass note, 2 as midrange chord. Johnson often interrupted the two-bar 1-2-1-2 // 1-2-1-2 with cross rhythms: 1-1-2-1 // 1-2-1 or even 1-1-2-1 // 1-1-2-1. Note in the latter pattern how each 2 falls "incorrectly" on the relatively strong third beat of the bar. This delightful cross-accent which momentarily confuses the meter, added complexity and swing to his performances and was soon picked up by other players.⁶

There are common mistakes made in thinking about rhythm. A poly-rhythm is not three "against" four. It is three with four. When we use the word "against," we are projecting conflict and competition. A basic concept in African music is

that three and four are always happening simultaneously. One rhythm is not more important than the other. Another misconception is the idea that jazz and African music is poly-metric. The scholar Simha Aron has written about why this can be problematic.

The term 'poly-metric' is only applicable to a very special kind of phenomenon. If we take 'metre' in its primary sense of metrum (the metre being the temporal reference unit), 'poly-metric' would describe the simultaneous unfolding of several parts in a single work at different tempos so as not to be reducible to a single metrum. This happens on some modern music, such as Charles Ive's works, Elliot Carters *Symphony, B.A.* Zimmermann's opera *Die Soldaten*, and Pierre Boulez's *Rituel*. Being poly-metric in the strict sense, these works can be only be performed with several simultaneous conductors.⁷

The combination of three and four can be found in the music of McCoy Tyner, Art Blakey, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and many other jazz musicians. Threadgill has used poly-rhythms with great effect in *Zooid*. He often writes material phrased in four combined with material phrased in three. In the following example, quarter note triplets are combined with a duple grouping in 5/4:



The influence of Latin America on jazz, which Jelly Roll Morton referred to as the “latin tinge,” is another part of the jazz tradition that has been minimized by jazz historians. In addition to the swing rhythm; tango, bolero, son, rumba, and danzon can be heard in early jazz recordings. Early jazz compositions such as *New Orleans Blues* (1925), *Cotton Pickers Rag* (1899), *Hello My Baby* (1899), *Cubanola* (1913), *Maurice Tango* (1912), *Mexi-Tango* (1914), *Round the Hall* (1913), *Flor De Brazil* (1914), *Bohemian Life* (1914), *Rosy Posy* (1922), *New Orleans Stomp* (1924) and *Amorita* (1920) are some examples of early jazz songs that contain Latin-American rhythms.⁸

You can hear a clear influence of Latin rhythms in Zoid's music. One of the first drummers to play in Zoid is Cuban-born Dafnis Preito. In addition to rhythms of Cuba, Zoid's current drummer Elliot Humberto Kavee has incorporated rhythmic concepts from India, West Africa, Vietnam and Indonesia. Although much attention has been given to the swing rhythm in defining jazz and understanding that not all avant-garde music is jazz, there are some other characteristics of Threadgill's music that fall within the jazz tradition.

The Blues

Zoid's music does not contain blues' changes or blues' forms, but the feeling of the blues can be heard in all of Threadgill's music. Threadgill grew up in Chicago which has a rich history of jazz, blues and gospel music. In his early years, he toured with the evangelist Horace Shepard. In 1969, Threadgill was a member of the house band at the Blues Club the Blue Flame on 39th Street in Chicago. Many famous blues musicians sat in such as Buddy Guy, and Mighty

Joe Young.

The Blues is something that is not easy to compartmentalize. In an interview with Ted Panken, Threadgill explained:

The idea about The Blues that's sometimes put in institutions and situations similar to what institutions put out, is that the Blues has some kind of strict formal structure, but it does not. The Blues is an internal thing. If one ever really heard The Blues, it had no type of structure until the Blues existed. That is, each piece presented its own development and structure. It had nothing to do with patterns that are often put forth, like The Blues is some 12-bar form or something like that. That's really not true. Not this type of blues. Maybe some type of blues that has got to be popular amongst certain type of musicians. But The Blues that I heard played on the streets of Chicago and probably played in the country, in the Delta, those blues could take any direction and any form at any time.⁹

Multi-instrumentalism

Most of the musicians in Zooid are multi-instrumentalist. Mr. Threadgill plays flute, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone and a variety of percussive instruments. Jose Davila alternates between trombone and tuba. Although they have stuck with performing on one instrument with Zooid, Chris Hoffman and Elliot Kavee are multi-instrumentalists as well. Hoffman plays the drums and Kavee plays Cello.

In the early days of jazz, many members of jazz ensembles were multi-instrumentalist. This is a practice that was later embraced by many members in the A.A.C.M. George Lewis points this out in *A Power Greater Than Itself*.

Multi-instrumentalism as a practice strongly asserts that as each musician moves towards proficiency on a variety of instruments, the groups as a whole are afforded a wider palette of potential orchestrations to explore. Such multi-instrumentalists, such as Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman undoubtedly provided crucial impetus for the A.A.C.M.'s radical extension of the practice. Left often cited, but hardly less influential in terms of the concept, are

Ellington's early ensembles as well as the early New Orleans musicians who were often fluent on a variety of unusual instruments as with Sidney Bechet's Five.¹⁰

Composition

Composition is another part of the jazz tradition. Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, and Thelonious Monk were very gifted composers. In the bebop era, there were some great composers as well but there was more of a focus on playing standards. In the 1970's, composition began to re-emerge as an important aspect of jazz both in fusion jazz and in more experimental jazz. Lewis Porter has explored this materialization.

Fusion artists' second accomplishment was in revitalizing jazz composition. Fusion pieces typically involve electronic sounds and an eclectic mix of influences, often from Latin America and African sources. Their forms are unusual, too.¹¹

It was during the 1970's that Threadgill began his musical career.

Threadgill's approach to composition was widely influenced by the A.A.C.M.

Muhal Richard Abrams noted that the exploration of extended forms was a long-standing direction among A.A.C.M. composers. In Chicago, we were looking at these things and equipped to deal with them when we came here to [New York].¹²

Threadgill has over 180 recorded compositions and many others that have never been recorded. From a young age, he began experimenting with forms and unconventional approaches to composition. This can be heard on some of the early A.I.R. recordings.

Collective Improvisation

"I have completely left the major-minor system in a favor of a chromatic way to facilitate collective improvisation along the lines of early jazz.¹³

Improvisation is an essential component of jazz. There are precedents for solo improvisation in much folk and popular music, in the European classical tradition of Baroque figured bass, and in concerto cadenzas, to cite only a few examples. However, there are no known precedents for the collective improvisation of early small combo Dixieland jazz performance and its simultaneous improvisation of several musical lines, except for the fact that collective improvisation has long been a strong feature of African music.¹⁴

Collective improvisation is an important part of Zoid. Sometimes, the lines blur between who is the soloist and who is playing accompaniment. The sound of the band relies on the group sound rather than the sound of an individual.

A unique feature with Threadgill's intervallic system is that in addition to allowing for melodic improvisation, it allows for harmonic improvisation. Although the harmonic movement is premeditated, when accompanying a soloist, musicians utilize counterpoint that is based on intervallic relationships and not pitch class. This allows for new harmonies to be produced that are not calculated.

In some ways, this is similar to Ornette Coleman's Harmolodic philosophy in which the rhythms and harmonies are all equal in relationship and independent melodies at the same time.¹⁵

In an interview with *The Wire* magazine Threadgill describes the process.

And it's the contrapuntal language. Everybody's moving all the time, so just 'what is the harmony' is questionable because a person could come back around to the same spot and they could be playing any number of things that fit within the intervallic possibilities. These are unlimited, whereas it's very limited

what can be played in a major/minor system. You can only play just a very small amount of things. But in every beat in what I am doing, there could be different information that is changing. You are not even certain when we repeated anything.¹⁶

Chapter 2

Threadgill's Early Life and Influence

Henry Threadgill was born on February 15, 1944 in Chicago, Illinois. His extended family included an aunt who studied classical piano and voice and an uncle who played bass in pianist Ahmad Jamal's trio and was a close friend of Wilbur Ware.¹ In George Lewis' *A Power Greater Than Itself*, Threadgill explains:

Well, my aunt, my mother's, she was the middle sister. There were about eleven or twelve kids. My mother has about twelve brothers and sisters and my aunt was the first one to go off to college and she was going off to study opera, which was fairly unusual. We didn't even know what the word "opera" meant. I was about three years old when she met my uncle, Nevin Wilson, who was the bass player. I thought that the piano in my house, my mother and grandparents' house, was actually my aunt's piano, and in fact it was my mother's piano. My mother had studied piano and she never told me. As a matter of fact, she never mentioned it until she read that I said that the piano belonged to my aunt and she got upset by it.²

The checkerboard of ethnic groups in Chicago's city blocks provided Threadgill encounters with the music of Poland, Yugoslavia, Mexico, and country-and-Western music. He encountered classical music on the radio and at school, and remembers finding himself absorbed in Tchaikovsky. He heard gospel music at church, and was impressed by the theatricality of religion. He also heard the blues and other black music at the Maxwell Street flea market.³

Muddy Waters is often mentioned by Threadgill as another influential Chicagoan. He attended Chicago's Englewood High School. Other Englewood alumni include A.A.C.M. members Steve McCall and Roscoe Mitchell, bassist and trombonist Louis Satterfield, and saxophonist Donald Myrick, who would

later gain fame as a member of the Phoenix Horns, the permanent horn section of Earth, Wind, and Fire. Another classmate from 1962 and early A.A.C.M. member was the drummer Jack DeJohnette.⁴

One of Threadgill's teachers was John Hauser who played with Charlie Parker.

He was a school in himself. He had an ensemble and he would teach us to read stock arrangements like *Melancholy Baby* and things like that. This very practical training served Threadgill so well that soon he got hired by marching bands. He would parade through Chicago streets with the VFW and the Shriners.⁵

Threadgill also credits Myrick as an influence and mentor during these formative years. At Englewood, Threadgill began playing the tenor and then baritone saxophones, inspired by local players including John Gilmore, Gene Ammons, Von Freeman, and Clifford Jordan. As a young teenager, Threadgill attended rehearsals and performances of Sun Ra's Arkestra and was impressed by the uniqueness of the bandleaders musical and organizational approach.⁶

Threadgill was also inspired by the classical music he heard at the time.

I used to sit up in front of the Chicago Symphony on the first row. That orchestra was hip. I had an assignment to go hear any classical music when I was 18. So I went down to Roosevelt University where they had one o'clock concerts on Friday afternoon. I heard Rubinstein and all of them at the University of Chicago right on the spot. I met Hindemith and Varese. I heard Berio and all of the contemporary guys. I heard all that music live. I heard all this Schoenberg music played live by probably the best players in the world at that time because that orchestra was hip. The Contemporary Chambers orchestra played only the most advanced stuff.⁷

After high school, Threadgill played with Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) marching bands in parades as well as with blues, mariachi, gospel, and polka bands. He also enrolled at Wilson Junior College, which is now Kennedy-King

College. There, he met musicians who later joined him to create the A.A.C.M., including Joseph Jarman, Richard Ari Brown, Anthony Braxton, Malachi Favors, and Roscoe Mitchell.⁸

Threadgill was exposed to diverse school of musical thought. In addition to lessons in theory and counterpoint, he studied Paul Hindersmith's classic *Elementary Training for Musicians*, Hindersmith's *The Craft of Musical Composition* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Style and Idea*.⁹ Lewis Jack DeJohnette, Eddie Harris, Bunky Green, and Betty Dupree were also students at Wilson with Threadgill. With the encouragement of faculty member Richard Wang, these students formed a music club and invited Muhal Richard Abrams, the A.A.C.M.'s future first president, to perform at the school.

Under the tutelage of Richard Wang at Wilson, Threadgill became excited about his courses in Harmony and Analysis and developed a study group with Mitchell and Jarman.¹⁰

I used to turn in anywhere from five to fifteen versions of a harmony assignment. You could ask Richard Wang. I would stay up all night because you could see all these possibilities. We had these blackboards and we would be drinking Tea and taking NoDoz. At the study group sessions, Mitchell introduced Threadgill and Jarman to the Art Blakey and Horace Silver charts that he had transcribed during his Army days. Threadgill also credits his attendance at concerts of the University of Chicago Contemporary Chamber Players directed by composers with influencing his early years.¹¹

While Threadgill was at Wilson College, Muhal Richard Abrams invited Threadgill to a workshop, now known as the Experimental Band, which laid the groundwork for the A.A.C.M. Every member was expected to compose music with a part for every musician in the ensemble regardless of instrument.

Threadgill recalls first creating a piece for the Experimental Band around 1962 which added momentum to the composing he had begun in high school.¹²

After attending Wilson, Threadgill went to Governors State University and later to the American Conservatory of Music where he got a degree in flute performance and composition. Stella Roberts, Threadgill's composition teacher at the ACM, was a student of Nadia Boulanger. He toured the U.S. with Philadelphia-based evangelist Horace Shepherd in 1963 and 1964. In the late 1960s, he toured with gospel singer Jo Jo Morris. With Shepherd, especially, he remembers being fascinated by the ability of these groups of highly trained musicians to shift gears based on the emotional trajectory of the service making each performance unpredictable and unique.

The A.A.C.M. was founded in May of 1965 and Threadgill was among its earliest members. But like many of his A.A.C.M. colleagues, he had to leave Chicago for military service in 1966. He first worked in the Army as a musician and arranger until, he claims, his arrangement of a patriotic song struck Army brass as disrespectful and he was sent to Vietnam. Threadgill's stint in the Army, however, introduced him to top-notch musicians and allowed him to dedicate much of his energy to music.¹³

He returned to Chicago in 1968 and joined the A.A.C.M. Big Band and also worked with Philip Cohran, one of the A.A.C.M.'s four original founders. Cohran had by then moved away from the collective and founded the Afro-Arts Theater because he saw the tendency of the A.A.C.M to be too "out there." Threadgill visited New York City in 1969, but soon returned to Chicago, where

he recorded for the first time with Muhal Richard Abrams and an all-A.A.C.M. quintet in the summer of that year on the album *Young at Heart, Wise in Time*.

In early 1970's, Threadgill turned his energies towards composing for and leading groups of his own. The first of these was Artist In Residence, a trio with Fred Hopkins on bass, and A.A.C.M. founder Steve McCall on drums. Threadgill played the saxophone and the hubkaphone, a found-sound percussion instrument he built out of hubcaps. Initially called Reflection, the trio was formed for a one-time event at the 1971 centennial celebration of ragtime composer Scott Joplin's birth, held at Chicago's Columbia College. Columbia also commissioned Threadgill to score for modern dance performances at this time.

The trio renamed itself A.I.R. after moving to New York in 1975, where many of the A.A.C.M. members had also moved. The three worked more or less as a collective, both musically and organizationally, although the bulk of the composed material was Threadgill's.¹⁴

A.I.R. toured widely and recorded nine albums together, the best known of which is *Air Lore* in 1979. The album was a rare exception to the original music-only credo of the A.A.C.M., but a return to the trio's roots, which included arrangements of Joplin rags and two Jelly Roll Morton pieces. A reconfigured trio, New Air, recorded two albums in the mid 1980s. As A.I.R.'s members became increasingly busy in New York, Threadgill embarked on larger-scale projects under his own name. The first was *X-75*, which, like many of his endeavors to come, brought together unlikely combinations of instruments often in pairs or even multiples. In *X-75*, Threadgill used four basses including a

piccolo bass, four woodwinds and a vocalist. The group recorded only one album, *X-75 (vol. 1)*.

Threadgill worked widely in New York with the David Murray Octet and Bill Laswell's collective, Material. He then put together another ensemble that would be his most visible effort for several years, The Henry Threadgill Sextet, or Sextett, as he sometimes called it. The group featured instrument pairs, which allowed him to compose for sections of strings, brass and percussion, bass and cello, trumpet and trombone, and two drummers. These three pairs combined to create the sound of Threadgill's sextet. Threadgill was the one-man woodwind section, playing alto saxophone, clarinet, and various flutes. "This little orchestra," as he called it, allowed him to experiment with Ellingtonian cross-sectional voicing.¹⁵ Threadgill's broad range of experiences contributed to a rich compositional palette for the Sextett across its six album and eight years together. The group recorded fight songs, calypsos, gospel, and blues swirled with odd-metered post-modern classical structures, with the energy of free jazz. The two drummers played a central part in the ensemble, often introducing pieces or spelling the horn players with high-energy duos, like a parade band percussion section.

The early 1990's saw the end of Threadgill's Sextett and the birth of The Very Very Circus, an ensemble composed of his reeds, a French horn, two guitars, two tubas, and drums. He also began to receive numerous nominations and awards in jazz magazine critics and readers polls.¹⁶

His composition and arranging projects for others multiplied, and even his

own albums featured chamber music-like pieces on which he did not play. One of these is 1993's *Song Out of My Trees*, where a quartet of graduated acoustic guitars teamed up with pianist Myra Melford. Wider critical reception led to a major-label contract with Columbia Records in 1995 which did not last long. "When I signed," he told writer Dan Ouellette, "the divorce papers were already being drafted." Gradually, *The Very Very Circus* gave way to *Make a Move* with guitar, accordion (or vibraphone), electric bass, drums, and Threadgill's saxophone.¹⁷

Chapter 3

The Birth Of Zooid

The word “zooid” is defined as any organic body or cell capable of spontaneous movement and of an existence more or less apart from or independent of the parent organism.¹

The compositional devices used in Zooid started to develop in India with the band Make a Move in the mid 1990's. In the 90's, Threadgill would often spend the winters in Goa, India. In 1995, after a tour in Europe, Threadgill invited Brandon Ross and Tony Cedras to come with him to Goa, India to work on some new music. This new music developed into the music for the recording *Where's My Cup*. Threadgill, Cedras and Ross worked together with the bassist Carl Peters. Although Peters was a great bass player, his reading ability was limited, so Threadgill asked Ross to keep his eye out for a new bass player and a drummer. Originally, Threadgill wanted Hamid Drake for the drum chair, but Drake had another commitment.

Brandon first found J.T. Lewis to play drums and then Lewis and Ross auditioned Stomu Takeishi for the bass chair. The following years, Threadgill worked on refining his system. In an interview I conducted with Brandon Ross, he talked about Threadgill's evolution.

The years that Henry would go to India, he would go and write, read, and be there all Winter. He would come back and lay stuff on us. One time, he came back and he said, “I have got something.” It's really interesting thinking about the evolution of things. The first time he handed us the stuff, it was really hard to grasp in terms of making it functional. He would work with a couple little pieces and things and he explained to us about this division of pitches and how we would deal with interpreting these voices. Takeishi and I still talk about it to

this day. He would then go back to India and would come back the following spring with some stuff. We would look at it and then suddenly it clicked in, like your subconscious mind working on stuff and putting it together. And then he would refine it further. I remember the first year he came and he had actually written in specific ranges and pitches. He might have something that said Ab, C and E. Threadgill would instruct me to play the C and the E and Takeishi to play the Ab. It was written in the clef. Then the following year, he would come back with just the symbols and the letters represented because he said that it was open this way to interpretation of ranges.²

Eventually, Dafnis Prieto took JT Lewis' place. In February 2001, *Everybody's Mouth's a Book* was recorded with the band Make a Move, which featured Threadgill on alto-saxophone and flute, Bryan Carrott on vibraphone, Brandon Ross on guitar, Stomu Takeishi on bass guitar and Dafnis Prieto on drums. *Everybody's Mouth's a Book* is the first recording that contains songs with Threadgill's new intervallic language. In April of 2001, Threadgill recorded the band Zooid's debut *Up Popped Two Lips* with Liberty Ellman on guitar, Tarik Benbrahim on oud, Jose Davila on tuba, Dana Leong on cello, and Dafnis Prieto on drums. Ironically, the material recorded on Zooid's debut does not contain any of the new intervallic language that is now associated with Zooid.

Threadgill's intention was to release two recordings simultaneously of Make a Move and Zooid. Instead of having a double CD, he released two separate CD's. Zooid was supposed to be a project, not a new band. From a marketing perspective, people did not group them together. People were eager to hear the new band, so by default, that became the end of Make a Move.

Zooid went on to make three more recordings, *Pop*, *Start the Tape*, *Stop* (released in 2005), *This Brings Us To Volume I* (recorded in 2008 and released in 2009), *This Brings Us To Volume II* (recorded in 2008 and released in 2012), and

Tomorrow Sunny/ The Revery, Spp (recorded in December of 2011 and released in 2012). The fourth annual *Village Voice* poll ranked *This Brings Us To Volume 1* the #2 recording of 2009. *The Wall Street Journal* ranked it as #1 in 2009.

Tomorrow Sunny/ The Revery, Spp received a 5-star review in *Downbeat* and Zoid was also the winner of Jazz group of the year by *Downbeat's* Critic's poll in 2012.³

See The Blackbird Now

Now with Zooid, form is a process with me. Before Zooid, I had been working on interior parts in advancing harmony, counterpoint and getting rid of the method of improvisation that has lasted for a long time. I needed to go another way with improvising to have people play more spontaneously. Well, now form itself is in a state of improvisation. These little things you were talking about, the 'mistakes,' affect form. The same thing happens in research labs where most of the discoveries are made through mistakes. The European template is a different way of assembling and processing the music. People keep that as a standard, but you can't take the music that we are making and apply it to that standard. They are two different worlds. This has been going on for a long time and has caused major confusion, where people would write things about what I am doing or what someone else is doing and say, "Is that a European method?" No, it isn't. I gather information and then I process the way I process. I come to rehearsal with much material that is written out, but that's only a starting point. Everything is written out, but it also doesn't mean a thing. The music is totally modular because what is here can be here or what is here can be there because this is what we discover in discovery. This is what needs to be brought out by music analysts and musicologists. ⁴

Handwritten musical score for a jazz ensemble, dated Aug. 2, 2011, by C. Humphrey. The score is written for Bass Flute, Trombone, Guitar, Cello, Bass Guitar, and Drums. The music is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.

The score is divided into three systems, each with a key signature change and a tempo marking:

- System 1:** Key signature: C major (one sharp). Tempo: 223345-7. Title: "See the blackbird now".
- System 2:** Key signature: D major (two sharps). Tempo: 2-3-5-6-7.
- System 3:** Key signature: E major (three sharps). Tempo: 22-34-177.

The instruments and their parts are:

- Bass Flute:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.
- Trombone:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.
- Guitar:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.
- Cello:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.
- Bass Guitar:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.
- Drums:** Features complex rhythmic patterns and improvisation.

The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (e.g., *mf*, *f*, *pp*, *acc*). The notation is written in a style that suggests improvisation and experimentation.

(1)

Handwritten musical score for the first system, featuring five staves (B.F., T., G., C., B.G.) and a double bar line. The score includes various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Above the staves, there are handwritten annotations: $\begin{matrix} G \\ F \\ E \end{matrix}$ 2-2-3, $\begin{matrix} D \\ C \\ B \end{matrix}$ -2334466, $\begin{matrix} D \\ C \\ B \end{matrix}$ 223347, and $\begin{matrix} A \\ G \\ F \end{matrix}$ 2-345-67. The staves are labeled B.F., T., G., C., B.G., and D. The score is written in a system with a double bar line.

Handwritten musical score for the second system, featuring five staves (B.F., T., G., C., B.G.) and a double bar line. The score includes various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Above the staves, there are handwritten annotations: $\begin{matrix} A \\ G \\ F \end{matrix}$ 2245667, $\begin{matrix} G \\ F \\ E \end{matrix}$ 22-34-677, $\begin{matrix} F \\ E \\ D \end{matrix}$ -23445-67, and $\begin{matrix} E \\ D \\ C \end{matrix}$ -233447. The staves are labeled B.F., T., G., C., B.G., and D. The score is written in a system with a double bar line.

Guitar "See the blackbird now"

223345-7 -2334466 223345-7 -233446

1/-233446 -2-35-677 -345667 2-3445-67

-2445-6 22-34-677 22-34-677 22-3

-2334464 223347 2-345-67 2245667

22-34-677 -23445-67 -233446

AD FA
F E

Bass Flute

61 BPM

Henry Threadgill

(2:11)

Flute

G Bb F G D Eb Ab Db B F D# G C Db
A E C F D Bb E

223345-7 -2334466

Bass Guitar

3 G Bb Gb Bb E A C F A Bb F# B
F# F# D# B E F

3 223345-7 -2334466 -233446

Bass

(2:33)

Fl.

Eb B Eb C
C E

6 22-34-677

Bass

7 A B E C C Db
Ab D# E

7 22-3 -2334466

Bass

2
(2:54) G Ab D F Flute Solo See the Blackbird Now C# F
9 F C# C

Fl. 

Bass 

10 F Bb D C# D C# Db C C# A#
D B F# E D

Fl. 

Bass 

11 Bb F# G Eb B G C C# A G# F# D
G C C# C#

Fl. 

Bass 

13 Eb B Eb C A B
C C E Ab

Fl. 

Bass 

15 E C E C Db
D# E

Fl. 

Bass 

Flute Solo See the Blackbird Now

3

16 E C D# 3 3 C Db E

Fl. 

16 -2334466

Bass 

17 G Ab F D F C# C# D C

Fl. 

17 223347

Bass 

18 F Bb D C# D C# F#

Fl. 

18 2-345-67

Bass 

19 Db C E C# A# D

Fl. 

19 2245667 3 3 3 3

Bass 

20 Bb F# G Eb B C G C C#

Fl. 

20 22-34-677

Bass 

4 Flute Solo See the Blackbird Now

21 Eb B Eb E C C

21 22-34-677 3 3 3 3

22 A B Ab 22-3 open improvisation

Chapter 4

An Analysis of *See the Blackbird Now*

See The Blackbird Now is from the recording *Tomorrow Sunny / The Revelry, Spp* on Pi records. This composition was created on August 2, 2011. It was recorded on December 3, 2011. This composition is being used for analysis because I was able to talk through the form of the piece with all the members of the band. Without understanding the form of a specific performance, analysis of Threadgill's music is nearly impossible. During the research, it was discovered that the same techniques Threadgill uses in *See the Blackbird Now* can be found in a majority of his Zooid compositions.

See the Blackbird Now is 19 measures long. It has two sections. The A section is the first 9 measures. The B section is measure 10 through 19. The composition is arranged for bass flute, trombone, guitar, cello, bass guitar and drums. It is composed of 45 three note cells. The bottom note of the cell is voiced for bass guitar the top left note is voiced for cello and the top right note is voiced for guitar. The composition is performed similar to a ballad with the quarter note having 61 beats per minute.

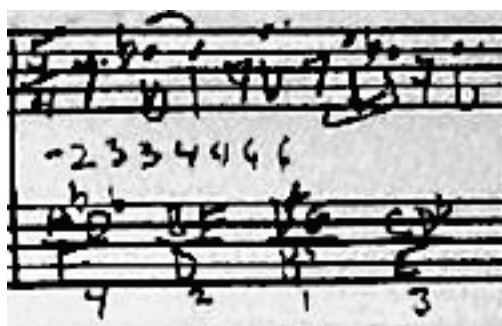
COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES

Expansion

One aspect of Threadgill's Zooid music is the expansion of form.

Expansion of form simply means having material that doubles in length for the solo section. This device has been used in classical music and in jazz, but Threadgill has refined this technique for his own personal use. Almost all of Threadgill's Zooid compositions contain some form of expansion. Threadgill has come up with a system where he places numbers under the cells to determine their length. If we take a look at the guitar chart, we notice that there is a number under each cell. Let's examine measure 2.

A measure of 5/4 during the melodic section would turn into a measure of 10/4 for the solo section.



With this system, the form could also triple or quadruple in length.

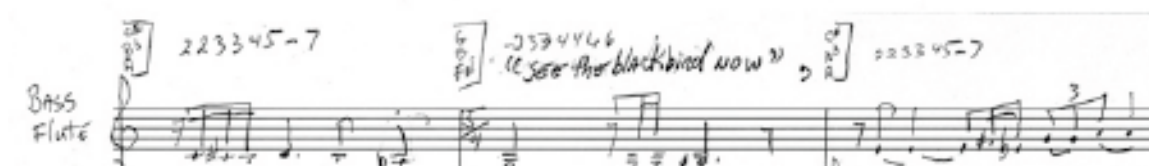
Expansion of the form is referred to as long meter and contraction of the form is

referred to as short meter.

Sometimes a composition can start in long meter and not go to short meter until the very end. Soloing could also alternate between using long meter and short meter. With the composition *See the Blackbird Now*, only the first 5 measures and the last 11 measures are played in short meter. The majority of the tune is in long meter.

The Intervallic Language

Threadgill composes from a master set of trichords that he refers to as cells. The master cell's for *See the Blackbird Now* are in a rectangle at the beginning of each measure on the score.



All of the cells contain three notes. The cell's function is defined by the intervallic relationships within the cell itself. Each master cell can mutate and produce other sister cells that contain some of the same intervallic material. If you have one bar of music with four chords, all four chords are going to share some of the same intervallic information. It must also be noted that the function of the master cell is arbitrary. That is to say any of the related cells could also function as the master cell because they are all related. Comparing the interval vectors we can see that the cells share the same interval content but only a couple of them are identical to the master cell.

Master Cell

Sister Cells

1.011100 111000 111000 111000

The first row shows a musical staff with a treble clef, a 16/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains four musical cells, each consisting of a whole note chord. The first cell is a triad of F#, A, and C. The second, third, and fourth cells are triads of Bb, D, and F.

2.100110 001110 002001 002100 101100

The second row shows five musical cells, each a whole note chord. The first cell is a triad of F#, A, and C. The second cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The third cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The fourth cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The fifth cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F.

3.101100 101100 100110

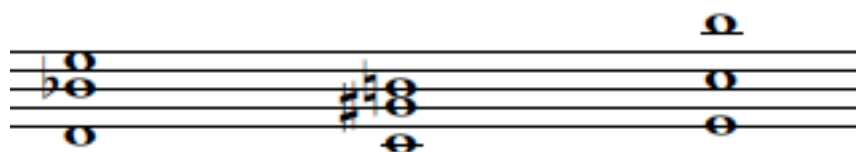
The third row shows three musical cells, each a whole note chord. The first cell is a triad of F#, A, and C. The second cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The third cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F.

4.100110 001111 101100

The fourth row shows three musical cells, each a whole note chord. The first cell is a triad of F#, A, and C. The second cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The third cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F.

5.100110 100011 100011

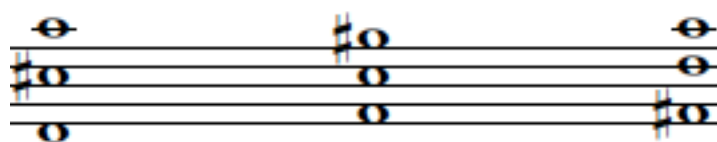
The fifth row shows three musical cells, each a whole note chord. The first cell is a triad of F#, A, and C. The second cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F. The third cell is a triad of Bb, D, and F.



6.001110

101100

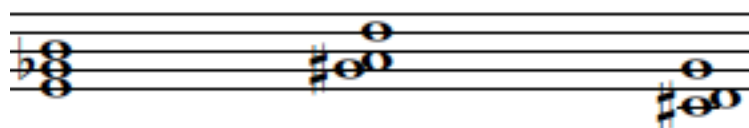
100110



7.100110

001110

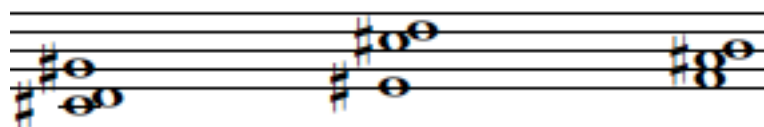
001110



8.100011

100011

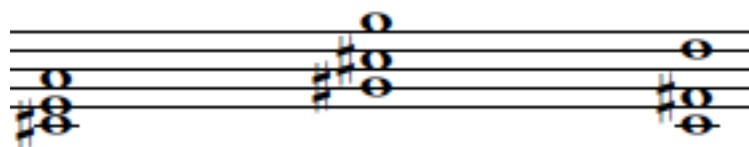
100011



9.100011

010101

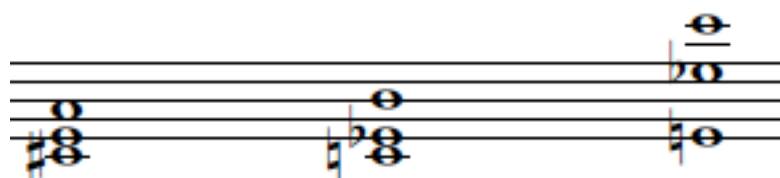
100011



10.001110

100110

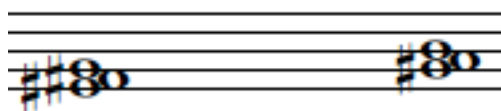
100110



11.001110

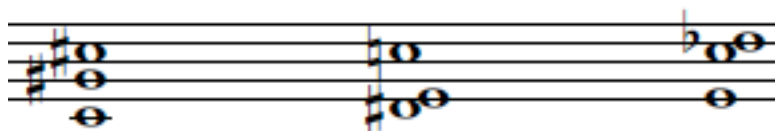
101100

100011



12.210000

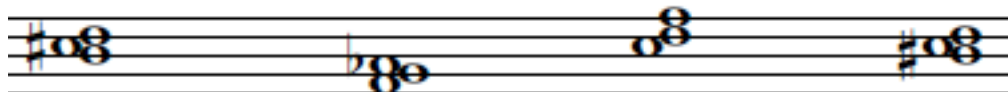
111000



13.100110

101100

101100

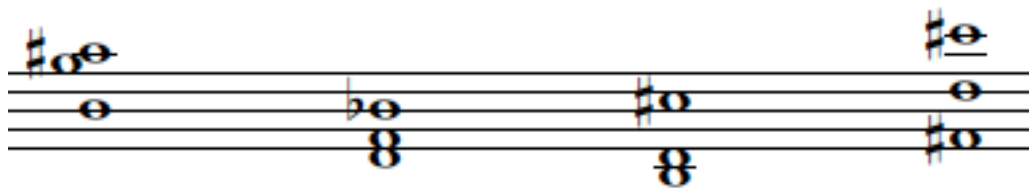


14.021000

111000

101100

210000

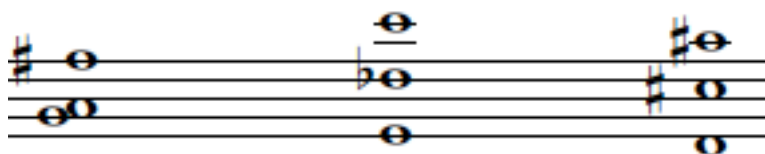


15.101100

001110

111000

010101



16.111000

101100

101100

17.001110	101010	101100	100011
18.100011	100110	100011	100011
19.100011	001110	100110	

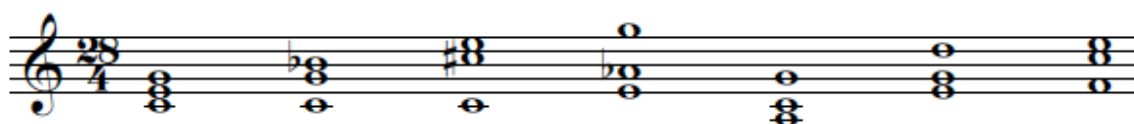
The diversity between the cells is significant. The process of mutating the master cell works similar to the way a chord can be inverted in tonal music. By rearranging the intervals within the cell, new intervals can be created which then become part of the intervallic set of the particular system. With each master cell, Threadgill can produce 6 sister cells which are considered to be part of the same family and can be interchanged with one another. All the harmony comes from these related cells.

The Operation

Let's examine the triad C, E, G. It has two inversions, E, G, C and G, C, E.



In Threadgill's system C, E, G has six mutations. (C G Bb), (C C# E), (E Ab G), (A C G), (E G D) and (F C E).



With Threadgill's system instead of re-arranging the notes, we re-arrange the intervals. We can only move utilizing the intervals found within the cell. A three note cell contains three different intervals. C, E, G has a minor 3rd between E and G, a major 3rd between C and E, and a perfect 5th between C and G.

For the first procedure, we will take the note E¹ and move it up a minor third above G¹. This will give us C, G, Bb. We will then take G¹ and move it a minor 3rd below E², this will give us C, C#, E.

For the second procedure, we will take the note C¹ and move it a major 3rd above E¹. This will give us E, Ab, G. Next we will take the note E¹ and move it a major 3rd below C¹. This will give us A, C, G.

For the third procedure, we will take the note C¹ and move it a perfect 5th above the G¹. This will give us E, G, D. We will then take G¹ and move it down a perfect 5th from C². This will give us F, C, E.

The next step is examining all the intervals that are contained in our newly devised cells. Our original cell of C, E, G contained a minor 3rd, a major 3rd, and a perfect 5th. However, all the other cells contain new intervals that were not in the original cell. The cell C, G, B \flat contains a minor 7th. The cell C, C \sharp , E contains a minor 2nd. The cell E, A \flat , G contains a major 7th. The cell A, C, G contains a major 7th. The cell E, G, D contains a minor 7th. The cell F, C, E contains a minor 7th. If we were to combine all the intervals of these 7 cells and truncate them putting them in ascending order, we would have a minor 2nd, a minor 3rd, a major 3rd, a perfect 5th, a minor 7 and a major 7th.

-2, -3, 3, 5, -7, 7

Threadgill Operation

C, E, G

-3

3

5

	intervals	1st procedure	2nd procedure	3rd procedure
1. $\rightarrow G \leftarrow$	1. = -3	Bb \uparrow -3 E	G G	D \uparrow 5 E
$\downarrow E \leftarrow$ 3.	2. = 3	G C# \downarrow -3	Ab \uparrow 3 C	G C
C 2. $\leftarrow \downarrow \downarrow$	3. = 5	C C	E A \downarrow 3	E F \downarrow 5

1. G to Bb = -3 -3 7 5 5 3

2. C to G = 5 -2 3 3 -3 5

3. C to Bb = -7 3 -3 7 -7 -7

truncated interval set = -2 -3 3 5 -7 7

Let's examine measure 4. From looking at the full score, we can see the master set is E, F, A. The intervallic set is -2 3 3 4 4 6.

Handwritten musical score for measure 4. The staves are labeled B.F., T, G, C, B.G., and D. The intervallic set -2 3 3 4 4 6 is written above the first staff. The notes are: B.F. (E, F, A), T (E, F, A), G (E, F, A), C (E, F, A), B.G. (E, F, A), and D (E, F, A).

The sister cells in measure 4 are (D# E A), and (B E F).

Handwritten musical score for measure 4. The staves are labeled B.F. and T. The intervallic set -2 3 3 4 4 6 is written between the staves. The notes are: B.F. (E, F, A) and T (E, F, A).

Using Threadgill's operation, the master cell E, F, A, produces the sister cells (E A C#), (E Db F), (F F# A), (D# E A,) (F A D), and (B E F). For this measure, Threadgill chooses to use the 4th and 6th sister cells as the harmony.

Threadgill Operation

Measure 4

E, F, A

3

-2

4

	intervals	1st procedure	2nd procedure	3rd procedure
1. $\rightarrow A \leftarrow$	1. = 3	C#↑3 F	A A	D↑4 F
$\downarrow F \leftarrow$ 3.	2. = -2	A Db↓3	F#↑-2 E	A E
E 2. $\downarrow \downarrow$	3. = 4	E E	F D#↓-2	F B↓4

1. A to C# = 3 3 -3 4 4 -2

2. E to A = 4 6 -2 -2 3 4

3. E to C# = 6 -2 3 +4 6 +4

truncated interval set = -2 -3 3 4 4 6

Improvising the intervals are used as a guide post, similar to the way a mode or scale might be used in a tonal composition. The interval sets are very important to voice-leading and comping. Similar to tonal counterpoint, moving against what is written is considered an illegal motion. The interval sets are always written next to the cells.

Some people have referred to Threadgill's system as a Serial Intervallic System. Threadgill disagrees with this term. He prefers to use the term Intervallic language.


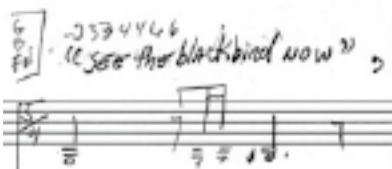



It's an intervallic language. It's an intervallic language that's kind of like serialism. Serialism is like when you have so many pitches, generally 12 pitches, but you can serialize stuff with six pitches, seven pitches, whatever. But we generally think of Schoenberg and 12 pitches. Well, the language, the compositional language, the musical language, the harmonic, contrapuntal, melodic language is such that we move from one series of intervals to another series of intervals throughout a piece of music. So let's say the first series has five intervals in it, the next has seven intervals in it, the next has three, the next has such and such like that, on and on like that. And those intervals are what control everything at that time. They control the voice leading and everything: The harmony, the voice leading, the melodic line, everything is moving not necessarily with every one of those intervals being used, but that pool of intervals, and improvisation is coming from there also.¹

Let's examine the melodic material in measure 4. The melody has a Bb moving to a D which is a major 3rd.



This movement corresponds with the intervallic set of -233446. Moving from Bb to F would be considered an illegal motion because there is not a perfect 5th in the interval set.

If we compare the melodic material of *See the Blackbird Now* with its corresponding interval sets, we can see that every movement made in the melody is contained within the interval set.

Linear Melodic Material	Truncation	Intervallic Sets
		
1. m2 M2 m3 m3 m3	2-3	223345-7
		
2. m3 m2 m3	-2-3	-2334466
		
3. M2 m3 M3 M2	233	223345-7
		
4. M3	3	-233446
		
5. P4 m2 p4	-24	-233446



6. m2 P5

-25

-2-35-677



7. A4 M6 m6

+466

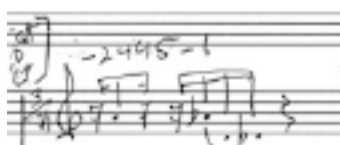
-3+45667



8. m2 A4

-2 +4

-2-3445-67



9. m2 A4 m2

-2 +4

-2445-6



10. m2 M2 m2 P4 m2

224

22-34-677



11. m3 m7 m2

233-7

22-34-677



12. m2

2

22-3



13. m3 m2

-2-3

-2334466



14. M2 d4 M2 m2

22-4

2233(-)47



15. M2 m3 M2

2-3

2-345-67



16. m2 M2 m2 m2

22

2245667



17. M2 m3 P4 m2

22 -3 4

22-34-677



18. m2

-2

-23445-67



19. m2 m3 d4 m2

-23-4

-233446

An important aspect to Threagill's notation is understanding that the (-) sign is only used when there is a single minor interval. When there is a single number without a (-), it is assumed major. When an interval is augmented, the (+) sign is used. When there are two of the same number, it is assumed that one is minor and one is major. When there are two 4's or two 5's, it is assumed that one is perfect and the other one augmented.

Keeping in mind that the form of the flute solo is different than the form of the melody, when we examine the intervals contained within Threadgill's solo, the majority of the intervals he uses are contained within the intervalic set, but there is some variation.



1. M2 M2 m3 m3

23

223345-7



2. m3 m2 A2

-23

-2334466



3. M2 A2 M3 M2

223

223345-7



4. M3

3

-233446



5. P4 m2 P4

-24

-23344



6. M2

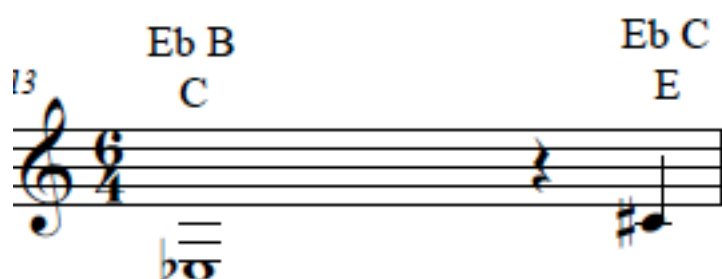
2

22-34-677



12. m3 M2 M3 M2 m2 m6 m2 M2 223(3)-6

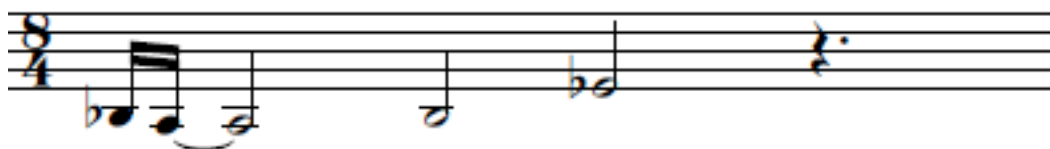
22-34-677



13. m7

-7

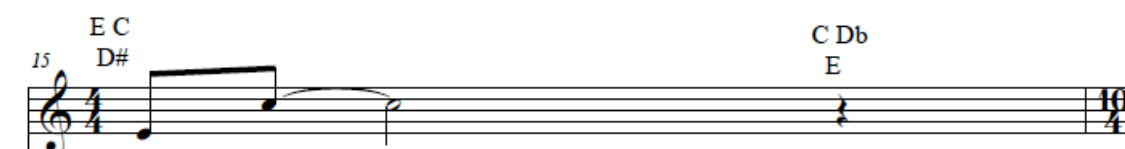
22-34-677



14. m2 m2 m2

-2

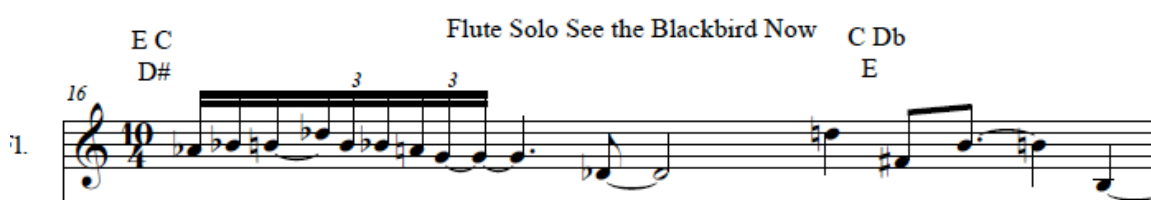
22-34-677



15. m6

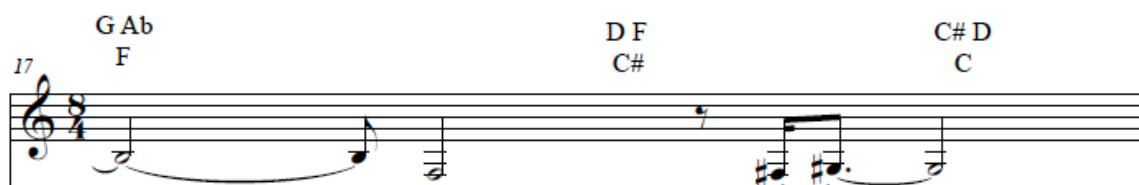
(-6)

22-3

16. M2 m2 M2 M2 m2 m2 M2 A4
+8 m6 P4 8

2244-6

-2334466



17. +4 M2

22-34-677



18. M2

2

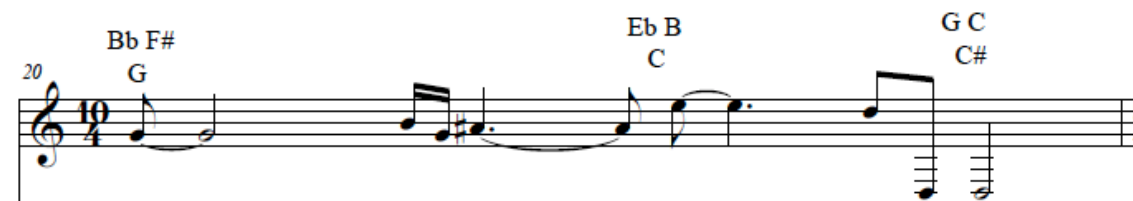
2-345-67



19. P4 P5 M2

245

2245667



20. A4 M3 M3 m3 P4 M2 8

23(3)(+4)4

2-34-677



21. M3 M2 m2

223

22-34-677



22. M3 d4 d2 m2 m6

-2(--2)(3)(4)(6)

22-3

Measure 10 contains a minor 2nd and there is only a major 2nd in the set. Measure 11 contains a major 3rd and there is not a major 3rd in the set. Measure 12 contains a major 3rd and there is only a minor 3rd in the set. Measure 16 contains a major 2nd and there is not a major 2nd in the set. Measure 20 contains a major 3rd and a augmented 4th which are not included in the set. Measure 22 contains a a diminished 4th and minor 6th, all of which are not included in the set.

How do we explain these inconsistencies? Once Threadgill's system is internalized, similar to tonal music, it is possible to break the rules on occasion.

The written music that's on the paper, everything is moving according to that. Not necessarily every interval that is up there, but when we improvise, we can take a lot of liberties because that is what the musicians have learned how to do. Now the players with me, they can do anything they want to do, because if you understand what you can and cannot do, then that means you can do everything since you understand those two things.²

With closer analysis, it is important to notice that although some of Threadgill's runs and flourishes have intervals contained outside of the interval set, the foundation of his solo does indeed fall within the intervallic framework. Let's examine the first 3 measures of Threadgill's solo.

(2:33)

Fl. Eb B C Eb C E

Bass 22-34-677

Fl. A B Ab E C D# C Db E

Bass 22-3 -2334466

In the first measure, Threadgill emphasizes D to E which is a major 2nd. A major 2nd is contained within the set. The second measure contains a minor 2nd and a major 3rd, Threadgill puts emphasis on G to A which is a major 2nd and is part of the set. In the third measure Threadgill puts emphasis on B to C which is a minor 2nd. This interval is part of the set. When improvising with Threadgill's system, playing fast runs are challenging and do not usually work except for elaboration. The system forces you to play slowly and intentionally.

The second measure of Threadgill's solo corresponds with measure 12 of the score. Notice that this interval set of 22-3 is much shorter than the others.

22-3 is only part of the full interval set. The full set is 2 2 3 3 4 7. For this measure, Threadgill wanted to restrict the soloist to only deal with these specific three intervals.

Threadgill Operation

Ab, A, B

2

-2

-3

	intervals	1st procedure	2nd procedure	3rd procedure
1. $\rightarrow B \leftarrow$	1. = 2	C# $\uparrow 2$ A	B B	D $\uparrow -3$ A
$\downarrow A \leftarrow \mid 3.$	2. = -2	B G $\downarrow 2$	Bb $\uparrow -2$ Ab	B Ab
Ab 2. $\leftarrow \downarrow$	3. = -3	Ab Ab	A G $\downarrow -2$	A F $\downarrow -3$

$$1. \quad B \text{ to } C\# = \begin{matrix} 2 & 2 & -2 & -3 & -3 & -2 \end{matrix}$$

$$2. \quad Ab \text{ to } B = \begin{matrix} -3 & 7 & -2 & -2 & 2 & -3 \end{matrix}$$

$$3. \quad Ab \text{ to } C\# = \begin{matrix} 4 & -2 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 3 \end{matrix}$$

$$\text{truncated interval set} = \begin{matrix} 2 & 2 & 3 & 3 & 4 & 7 \end{matrix}$$

Let's examine measure 10.

Musical score for measure 10, Flute 1 (Fl.) and Bass staves. The Flute 1 staff shows a melodic line with notes: D (F Bb), B (D C#), F# (D C#), E (Db C), and D (C# A#). The Bass staff shows a bass line with notes: 2 (2-345-67), 4 (2245667), and 6 (2245667). The measure is marked with a 10 and a 4/4 time signature.

Although this measure contains a minor 2nd between the F# and G, it is part of a run. The emphasis is put on the descending interval between F# and C# which is a perfect 4th and is contained within the set.

Let's examine measure 11.

Musical score for measure 11, Flute 1 (Fl.) and Bass staves. The Flute 1 staff shows a melodic line with notes: Bb (Bb F#), G (G), and Eb (Eb). The Bass staff shows a bass line with notes: 22 (22-34-677) and 77 (22-34-677). The measure is marked with a 11 and a 4/4 time signature.

Although there is a major 3rd between B and G, the B is a sixteenth note. It is not stressed. The real emphasis is on the octave which is impartial.

Let's examine measure 12.

Musical score for measure 12, Flute 1 (Fl.) and Bass staves. The Flute 1 staff shows a melodic line with notes: b B (b B), C (C), G C (G C), C# (C#), C# A (C# A), G# (G#), F# D (F# D), and C# (C#). The Bass staff shows a bass line with notes: 22 (22-34-677) and 77 (22-34-677). The measure is marked with a 12 and a 4/4 time signature.

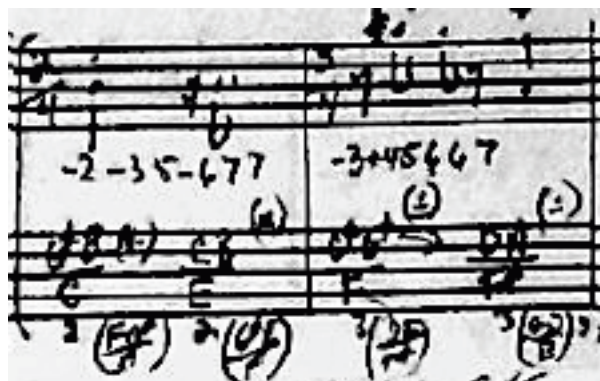
Although there is a major 3rd between Eb and G, the emphasis of this measure is the descending interval between E and G which is a minor 6th which is contained within the set.

Modular Form and Retrograde Harmonic Motion

Threadgill's use of form is a crucial part of his music that is rarely discussed. Threadgill's forms are often just as complex as his harmonic material. Modular form has been used by Stockhausen in compositions like *Klavierstück XI* and *Zyklus*. Boulez's *Piano Sonata No. 3* contains modular form. Earl Brown also used modular form in his *Available Forms I and II for Orchestra*. Threadgill, however, uses modular form in an improvisational context. Threadgill's music can be re-arranged so that soloists have new and interesting forms for improvising.

See the Blackbird Now starts with an unaccompanied cello solo that is an open improvisation. Rather than start at the top of the composition, Threadgill chooses to have the bass and guitar come in looping a 4 measure section of the piece. Measures 6 and 7 are first played using a different set of cells that are in parenthesis (A F G#), (F G#E), (F#D F), (B G D). The two measures are then repeated using the original cells of (G#B C), (CB E), (C#G# F) and (D A F#).

This is done in long meter so we have a measure of 4/4 and a measure of 6/4 that is repeated 5 times for a total of 50 beats.



This is the introduction to the piece. If we listen closely to the bass guitar,

we can hear that although the rhythms he plays are improvised, he is strictly following the harmonic sequence.

The image displays two musical staves, each with a guitar part (top) and a bass guitar part (bottom). The guitar parts are in treble clef, and the bass guitar parts are in bass clef. Both staves are in 4/4 time. The first staff shows a sequence of chords: FG# G#E, DF G D, G# B C B, C#G# DA, and F G# G# E. The second staff shows a sequence of chords: DF GD, G#B C B, C# G# D A, F G# G# E, and D F GD. The bass guitar parts provide a harmonic foundation for these chords.

Staff 1:

Measure	Guitar Chords	Bass Guitar Notes
1	FG# G#E	A F
2	DF G D	F# B
3	G# B C B	C E
4	C#G# DA	F F#
5	F G# G# E	A F

Staff 2:

Measure	Guitar Chords	Bass Guitar Notes
6	DF GD	F# B
7	G#B C B	C E
8	C# G# D A	F F
9	F G# G# E	A F
10	D F GD	F# B

Next is the melodic material. Only the first 5 measures of the score are played followed directly by a bass flute solo. The first five measures are played in short meter, but the bass flute solo is in long meter. The form of the flute solo is a 8 measure section that is repeated 2 times. The first time, the first measure (measure 10) is skipped. There is a 7 measure section followed by an 8 measure section. Then, only measures 11 and 12 are played directly followed by an open improvisation.

Flute

Bass Guitar

Measures 1-4. Chord symbols: Eb B C, Eb C E.

Fl.

Bass

Solo

Measures 5-8. Chord symbols: Eb B C, Eb C E.

Fl.

Bass

Measures 9-12. Chord symbols: AB, Ab, E C, D#, C D#, E, G Ab, F, D F#, C#, C# D, C.

Fl.

Bass

Measures 13-16. Chord symbols: F Bb, D C#, D C#, D# C, C# A#, Bb F#, Eb B, G C, D, B, F, C, C#.

Fl.

Bass

Measures 17-20. Chord symbols: C# A, F# D, Eb B, Eb C, A B, G#, C#, C, E, Ab.

Fl.

Bass

Measures 21-24. Chord symbols: E C, C D#, G Ab, D F, C# D, F Bb, D C#, D C#.

measure 11

Fl

Bass

measure 12

Fl

Bass

open improvisation

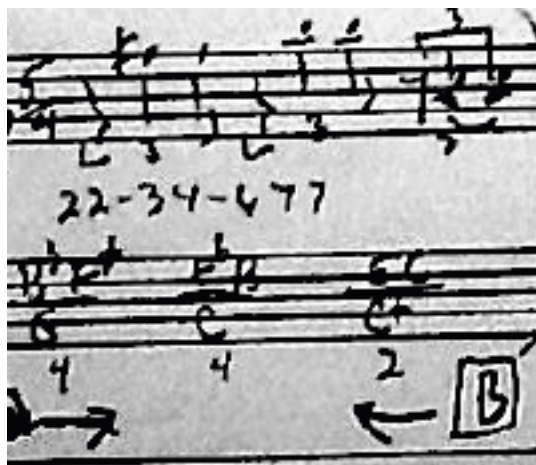
After the brief open flute improvisation, there is a unaccompanied guitar solo. Then the tune moves through a cycle. Looking at the guitar chart, we can see that Measure 14, 17 and 16 are combined to form a 3 measure sequence that is repeated and looped. These measures are played in long meter. For the A section and the B section, the harmonic sequence is in retrograde.

measure 14

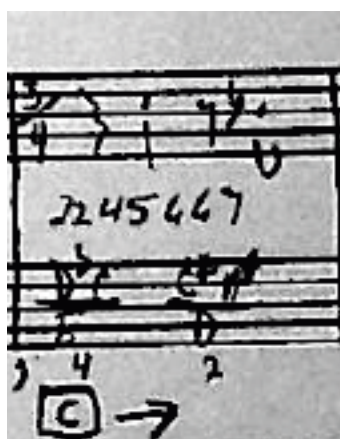
2 2 3 3 4 7

4 2 2 A

measure 17



Measure 16



(FGBb) (C#DF) (CC#D) becomes (CC#D) (C#DF) (FGBb) and (GBbF#) (EbBC) (C#GC) becomes (C#GC) (EbBC) (GBbF#). The C section is played with the original forward motion (EDbC) (DC#A#). However, after repeated listening, I discovered that a last minute change must have occurred because the actual form is B,C,A and not A,B,C. This repeats twice.

	10	6	8
Guitar	-	-	-
	E C Eb B Bb F#	Db F# C# A#	C# D D F G Ab
	C# C G	G D	C C# F
Bass Guitar	-	-	-

Next, we have the trombone solo. The trombone solo is over the first 7 measures which is repeated and looped. The trombone ends his solo and cues in the band by playing the written material on measure 6 and 7. The first time it is played, the cells in parenthesis are utilized (BCF) (EFB). The second time the original chords are used. The material from measure 9 through measure 19 is then played as written.

Henry Threadgill

6:52

Trombone

Bass Guitar

Chord symbols for measures 1-5:
 Measure 1: G Bb F G D Eb / A E C
 Measure 2: Ab Db B F D# G C Db / F D Bb E
 Measure 3: G Bb Gb Bb / F# F
 Measure 4: E A C F / D# B
 Measure 5: (no symbols)

5

Tbn.

Bass

Chord symbols for measures 6-10:
 Measure 6: A Bb E / F# B F
 Measure 7: G# B C B / C# A# D A
 Measure 8: G Bb F G D Eb / A E C
 Measure 9: (no symbols)
 Measure 10: (no symbols)

9

Tbn.

Bass

Chord symbols for measures 11-15:
 Measure 11: Ab Db B F D# G C Db / F D Bb E
 Measure 12: G Bb Gb Bb / F# F
 Measure 13: E A C F / D# B
 Measure 14: A Bb F# B / E F
 Measure 15: (no symbols)

13

Tbn.

Bass

Chord symbols for measures 16-20:
 Measure 16: G# B C B C# A# D A B C E F AD D G# / C E F F# F B G# C#
 Measure 17: (no symbols)
 Measure 18: (no symbols)
 Measure 19: (no symbols)
 Measure 20: (no symbols)

Rehearsing is not just a way to learn Threadgill's music, but it is also part of the composition process. Threadgill uses rehearsals as a way to experiment with new ways of re-arranging his material. The rehearsals are typically 3 hours long with a half hour break in the middle. Typically, there will be 5 to 7 rehearsals before a performance. During rehearsals, it is not uncommon to work on 1 or 2 measures of music at a time experimenting with different ways of reconfiguring the material. After repetition, the arrangements are internalized.

Rhythmic Phrasing and Elimination of the Downbeat

The 19 different measures of *See the Blackbird Now* have 4 different time signatures ($4/4$, $5/4$, $3/4$ and $2/4$) and we never have the same meter for more than 2 bars. Things are constantly changing. This is one of the techniques Threadgill uses to eliminate the feeling of a downbeat. Threadgill often composes from the piano without thinking about bar lines or time signatures. Once the melodic line is composed, he sees where the phrases naturally occur and then maps out the time signatures.

Another thing I've notice in many of Threadgill's recent work, is that the down beat is often missing. If we look at the melody, out of 19 measures, only 4 measures have a down beat on the first beat of the bar (measures 2, 5, 10 and 14).

A

B

If we look at a new interpretation of the melody in 4/4 time, a similar result is achieved. This time, 5 measures contain a downbeat (measures 2, 4, 6, 11 and 13).

meter at all.

I don't write anything for Elliot [Humberto Kavee] anymore, maybe a note here and there. It's very difficult to figure out what we're doing, too, because it sounds like we are playing in $\frac{1}{4}$. That's because I never allow the drums to play in the meter I am playing in. That won't happen. There is no downbeat. You can't tell. You don't know. It's funny when people say things like, "The section in $\frac{5}{4}$," and I say, "I'd like to know where that was," and the band would say, "We would, too. I don't know where you heard that!" because basically I think in $\frac{1}{4}$. Beat to beat, penny to penny, dollar to a dollar. I don't need drums to play in the same meter the band is playing in because that's really redundant.

In rhythm, they talk about secondary beat, the first beat, and the first accent and the secondary accent. When you put meter against meter, that's what you get. So now you lose all meter, and that's really what I want. I don't want any sense of meter because when you sense meter, you see and feel division. This is over, and this is coming next. It gets in the way of the flow. The flow is everything in film, everything in theater, everything in literature, everything in architecture, everything in dance, everything in music. Boxing or barring music for me is over. In bars of $\frac{4}{4}$ to the next bar of $\frac{4}{4}$ or bar $\frac{4}{4}$ to bar of something else you feel the demarcation. The demarcation has no flow. It inserted itself into the picture in the form of some kind of physicality that takes away from the big picture. You want to see the forest, not the trees.⁴

Kavee does not play the drums with the same metric phrasing as the band. He purposely distorts a sense of meter by frequently playing over the bar lines. This is a concept that Threadgill wants for the Zooid music, but it is also a concept that Kavee has been using years prior to joining the band. Part of improvising for Kavee is coming up with new ways that he can reconstruct the form or cycle of a composition. Rather than think measure to measure, Kavee often thinks beat to beat. Let's examine the form of a blues strictly dealing with its rhythmic form.

A blues has a 12 measure form. If we think about it measure to measure, we could break it up into two 6 measure phrases or we could break it up into three 4 measure phrases. It could be broken up into 4 three measure

phrases. However, if we think about it beat to beat, there are many more ways to break it up. A blues has 48 beats. We could think of it as:

$$10 + 10 + 10 + 10 + 8$$

$$8 + 8 + 8 + 8 + 8 + 8$$

$$24 + 24$$

$$4 + 6 + 4 + 4 + 6 + 4 + 6 + 4 + 6 + 4$$

$$15 + 18 + 15$$

Kavee does this intuitively when performing with Zooid. Another concept that Kavee utilizes is Rhythmic Manipulation.

Rhythmic Manipulation

The Idea of rhythmic manipulation is to alter the perception of a meter. If there is a measure of 7/8, you can alter it so it has the perception of being 11/8. This is done by utilizing triplets, by replacing the twos with threes and the single note groupings with two-note groupings.



becomes



The next step is balancing out the triplets so that they sound like even eighth notes.

This concept can be applied to a multitude of rhythms.

If you have a measure of 12/8 you can alter it so it has the perception of 19/8.

The pattern of 2-2-1-2-2-2-1 becomes 3-3-2-3-3-3-2

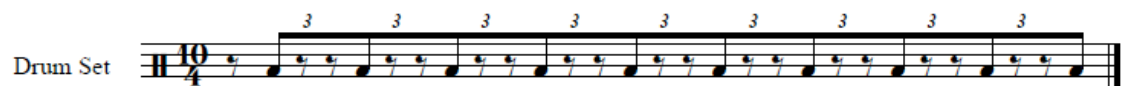
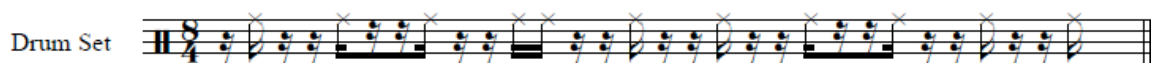


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Kavee uses the concept frequently in the way he breaks up metric time with Zooid. An example of this is what he does at the beginning of Threadgill's solo at 2:36.



The phrase that Kavee plays on the ride cymbal could also be perceived as a measure of 10/4 displaced by an eighth note.



Interview with guitarist Brandon Ross

November 17, 2014

Telephone Interview

Brandon Ross is a guitarist/composer/songwriter who was a member of Threadgill's Very Very Circus and his band Make a Move. Mr. Ross has worked with Cassandra Wilson, Tony Williams, Arto Lindsay, The Lounge Lizards, Leroy Jenkins, Butch Morris, Bill Frisell, Me'Shell N'degeocello, Moreno Veloso, Arrested Development, Craig Harris, Archie Shepp, Muhal Richard Abrams, Deidre Murray, Mino Cinelu, Don Byron, Graham Haynes, Lizz Wright, Myra Melford, Ron Miles, Oliver Lake, Bill Laswell, Zeena Parkins, Wadada Leo Smith, and many others. Mr. Ross also performs in the trio Harriet Tubman.

Taylor: I'm curious as to when Threadgill started using a number system to indicate how the form expands during improvisation. Is this something he was doing with Make a Move?

Ross: That sounds like a refinement that he achieved. The thing about Make a Move and Zooid was that Threadgill's intention at the time was to release two recordings simultaneously with Make a Move. Instead, he released two separate CD's rather than release a double CD. From a marketing perspective, people did not group them together. People would say things like, "Threadgill has a new band. Let's hear the new band. What's the new band doing?" So Make a Move basically never really went away.

It's funny. I ran into Dafnis Prieto one night several years ago when we

were both at this venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We were talking and this person nearby didn't realize that he and I knew each other. Prieto explained that we were in a band together and I started laughing. He said, "You know, Henry never fired us (laughter)." I told him that I agreed. So, when promoters and agents wanted us to do gigs, they all wanted to hear what Zooid was doing because they thought they already knew what Make a Move was all about or they just wanted to hear the latest thing.

I remember, at the time, it reminded me of when Ornette Coleman released *In all Languages* with his classic quartet and then with Prime Time, and playing some of the same pieces, but interpreted differently. So you got the sense that this was more like a page out of Coleman's oeuvre meant to be seen as a whole. I think that is also a part of what Threadgill was doing, too, but because he released two separate CD's, the perception shifted things to where Make a Move basically suffers from the atrocity of the lack of promoter interest in what they considered to be the older project.

So, this expansion of form with a number under the cell sounds like a refinement that he achieved, which is really great hearing about because I have not really talked to him about that. One of the things that he (Threadgill) has always done, to the best of my knowledge, and certainly when I first started working with him in 1989 with Very Very Circus, was the the interpretation of segments of music.

This could mean that it's a number of bars or it could mean different kinds of material expressed in one rate of evolution of the meter and then expressed in

a longer or shorter rate of development. There is a wonderful thing about form, the elasticity of form, and the perception of how something is moving and how things are developing. It's pretty great.

But what happened during the Make a Move period was that Threadgill was spending his winters in India. That meant that he would leave around early November and be there until the Spring, before the monsoons arrived. Actually, Make a Move was conceived in India. I was there. Tony Cedras and I had played in one of the last tours of Very Very Circus, which Henry called Very Very Circus Plus. It included Cedras and his wife singing. At the conclusion of that tour, Threadgill took Cedras and me on with him to India to start work on the new band which was to become Make a Move.

We spent three weeks at his place in Goa working on the music for *Where's Your Cup* with an Indian bassist named Carl Peters. Peters was a great bass player. He was not incredibly literate in terms of dealing with the kind of stuff that Threadgill was writing to read and although Threadgill really wanted him to play in the band, Threadgill felt that he would not be able to move quickly enough with Peters' reading limitation.

So, for three weeks in India, we basically played in the house every day working on these pieces and talking about different things that were happening. When we got back to New York, Threadgill asked me to keep my eyes out for a bass player and a drummer. He wanted Hamid Drake to do it but...

Taylor: Hamid Drake? Wow!

Ross: Yeah, he wanted Hamid Drake to do it, but Drake had a long-term

commitment that he could not gracefully get out of. So, that did not happen.

Then, J.T. Lewis called me one day out of the blue and I told him I just got back from India with Henry and he was starting up this new band, etc. The next day, Lewis called me back and said “I need to be in that band.” He said that he had a dream about it and I told him that I thought it could be really interesting and that I will get in touch with Threadgill.

Then I saw Stomu Takeishi playing somewhere. I did not know him, but he was playing with a couple friends of mine and I was super impressed with how he was playing. I know I’m digressing a little bit but you will see how it ties back in later. He was playing electric bass with Jason Wong and cellist Michelle Kinney and he was able to blend with them in a way that was very impressive, and I have not heard that very often. Afterwards, I introduced myself to him, got his phone number, and asked him if he would be interested in auditioning for a band that Henry Threadgill was starting. He did not know who Henry Threadgill was. So, he came and Cedras, myself and Lewis auditioned him. It was cool and I said, “Let’s go with Takeishi.”

The years that Henry would go to India, he would go and write, read, and be there all winter. He would come back and lay stuff on us. One time, he came back and he said, “I have got something.” It’s really interesting thinking about the evolution of things. The first time he handed us the stuff, it was really hard to grasp in terms of making it functional. He would work with a couple little pieces and things and he explained to us about this division of pitches and how we would deal with interpreting these voices. Takeishi and I still talk about it to this

day.

He would then go back to India and would come back the following Spring with some stuff. We would look at it, and then suddenly it clicked in, like your subconscious mind working on stuff and putting it together. And then he would refine it further. I remember the first year he came and he had actually written in specific ranges and pitches. He might have something that said Ab, C and E. Threadgill would instruct Brandon to play the C and the E and Takeishi to play the Ab. It was written in the clef. Then the following year, he would come back with just the symbols and the letters represented because he said that it was open a way to interpretation of ranges and you come back around and see something written every time you are going to go back to the same place. This way, you have this openness toward how something can be expressed in terms of pitch, register and range. And that was really interesting, too, because now I would be looking at the spelling of groups of harmony and not chords.

Taylor: Yes, that's what he uses to this day.

Ross: Well, this was the beginning of all of that. I've adapted it, too, because it is so much more flexible. So, that was the beginning of that. The Zooid thing and *Everybody's Mouth's a Book* were recorded around the same time. And Zooid was originally started as a special project ensemble that he was doing for something with different instrumentation. Tony Cedras was playing accordion, Prieto was playing drums, and someone was playing the oud. I don't think there was guitar the first time around. That was the beginning of that system and hearing what you're saying in terms of dealing with form. Threadgill always had

this stuff going on with form. With Very Very Circus, he used to do all these things.

Taylor: I feel like I have even heard expansion in some of the Air compositions.

Ross: Yes, long meter short meter, long meter as is. Long meter is one of those phenomena that is confusing at first. Then, it coalesces because everybody knows where they are and it really fascinates you. You wonder, “how did they do that?”

Taylor: Another device that Threadgill uses is modular form. I feel like this is what makes his music so hard to analyze.

Ross: Back with Very Very Circus, Threadgill would say, “When we hit, people are going to come up and they are going to want your gig (laughter). But the thing is, I don’t care who you are. You cannot do this gig if you come up and just look at the music on the stand unless you know all of the things that we know about which you would only know by actually being in the band and being possessed with that insight.” Let’s take a look at the idea of looping sections. You go through a form and you play three bars four times, something in the middle of something, or you develop certain things in a certain way. There are lots of ways to deal with stuff like that.

Taylor: I think that that’s what’s so unique and also so challenging about Threadgill’s music when you are trying to analyze it. Unless you have the specific arrangement of a performance, it’s impossible to really know what’s happening.

Ross: Right, you would have to have a score and even then, it would be challenging. Last September, we did the “Very Very Threadgill” in Harlem.

Harriet Tubman was asked to play some pieces. I was talking to Threadgill on the phone about one of the pieces and we were trying to find this piece because Cassandra Wilson was going to sing. We had one that we knew we were going to do and he was looking for another one, so he went to Very Very Circus and came up with *Hoppa Hoppa* and I said “yeah that’s cool, but it might be a bit ambitious for the amount of time that we are going to have to work with Cassandra.” I said what about *Unrealistic Love*?

Ok, so you’ll appreciate this Chad. He said “Unrealistic Love.’ How does that go again?” I started singing it, you know, the melody. And he said, “Wait a minute, I got it right here.” He put it on and we started listening to the intro which is just trombone and guitar. He said, “Oh man, I write so much music I forgot all about this, Then it kicked in and the tuba’s came in and the whole thing came together and he said, “Damn!”

He said, “You used to always ask for this piece.” I said, “Now you know why.” (laughter) Now that piece was interesting. The first three bars of the piece as it’s going forward are played retrograde as an introduction. Now you can have the music and look at it and not know that information, and even when I was in the band I didn’t know that, because Henry would never give anybody the full score He didn’t want people to...

Taylor: He didn’t want people to see the full score?

Ross: No, and not because he was trying to keep anything secret. He just didn’t want things to be crystallized from a particular type of perception about things. It’s adaptive. Even when I was playing that show, there was something in the

big band, the dance band thing I was playing in. He said, “Brandon, I want you to solo in here.” and I said “These are not the changes, right?” And he said, “No, no that’s something else.” I said, “Well what are the changes?” He said, “You don’t need them. You’ll be alright.” And that kind of thing. It activates another type of skill set. But like you just said, if you’re looking at the score and I’m looking at the score because I have to tell Melvin how to play some of this stuff and JT hadn’t played it, it was a different process. He and I are both alumni from Make A Move so for Melvin, it was a different process. I said, “Ok, I see what he’s doing Melvin. Right here, they’re playing this retrograde and it is in time. It sounds like it’s not in time, but it is in time.”

Taylor: Threadgill has a few pieces like that where it sounds like there is no time. I’ve been studying *See the Blackbird Now*. When I first heard it, I thought it was cool. There is this short melodic material and then it’s just open. After talking with Liberty, I learned that it is a very structured piece.

Ross: Which record is that? *Volume 2*?

Taylor: No, it’s on the most recent one.

Ross: I haven’t even heard that one yet. What’s it called?

Taylor: *Tomorrow Sunny The Revery, Spp.*

Ross: I’ll have to pick that up.

Taylor: In Zooid, Threadgill sometimes writes out different meters for the drums that is different from the rest of the ensemble. Is this something he was doing with Make a Move as well?

Ross: I would generally say no. At least not in terms of written things, although

there were some things like that. And he loves an offbeat. I'll tell you that much. I'd use to joke with him and say "Henry you're giving me all this heart palpitation music, man." He's a loving fool of a offbeat man. This particular piece, *Unrealistic Love*, was the same thing. Nobody is playing on one. It starts in seven, so it throws you because the and of one sounds like a one.

Taylor: It seem like he usually thinks beat to beat. Rarely does he have more than two measures in the same time signature.

Ross: That's probably a more recent development. During *Make a Move*, he once said something to J.T. Somebody was saying something and he was saying, "Well, it's one." "What time signature is it?" "It's in one (laughter)." That is the thing of beat to beat. It's kind of like if you just play the value of things, you'll get there. You'll get there, unless something calls for a downbeat.

I remember once, early on when things were first coming together, he stopped the band and said, "Hey J.T., everybody in here knows how to count. I didn't hire you to play time (laughter). I hired you to play the drums."

Taylor: That's deep. I remember a similar story about Coltrane telling Reggie Workman that he hired a quartet but he was only getting a trio.

Ross: That's a hard one to cut through. That whole drum and bass player thing is some deep glue. When you're training, I'm sure you know the way that is, but it's also that thing I got out of working with Threadgill and also Leroy Jenkins. It's independence, which is why you could also have a sextet with seven instrumentalists.

Taylor: Was Threadgill using his number system for intervals early on with *Make*

a Move?

Ross: *Everybody's Mouth's a Book* was the first expression of that. I remember that he was very excited about that record because of what we were doing and the way things could move in it. I still do a lot of stuff with that. It lends itself to a truer feeling of improvisation for me. You can't play any licks. You can, but you recognize that you are and it doesn't sound good.

The thing is that everybody is going to come to it their own way. And what I like about it is that the environment is always changing. The environment around you is shifting and changing while you are as well, so it's truly improvisation for me. Stomu and I did a duo record that came out the beginning of this year and there a couple pieces on there that I wrote that were dealing with the intervallic stuff that we do.

Taylor: That's out now?

Ross: Yeah it's on *Sunnyside* and it's called *Revealing Essence*.

Taylor: Okay, I'm going to check that out.

Ross: It's under the duo name For Living Lovers. You'll find it if you look for it. I talk about Threadgill in the linear notes. I mention that if it were not for our tenure with him, the music would sound much different than it does. There's one thing about Henry, too, that I like to share with people. Most people in any endeavor like to operate from their strengths and I'm not saying the Henry doesn't. I'm sure he does, but I think one of his strengths is to operate from developing the unknown.

I was going to say weakness. It's not weakness where you're a little less

developed. Those are the areas where he's always going. He doesn't hang out in the strengths, the known, and the tried and true. He keeps moving. He doesn't even repeat his own music which is really interesting, like how he forgot about *Unrealistic Love*. I kept thinking about that. It must be really interesting for him to hear all that music played back. It's like hearing it for the first time. I find that to be really unusual. Most people are trying to find that hit, but he's constantly moving on a different path.

We were in Make a Move and there was something that we were doing, he came in with a piece and he had the melodic information. We got to figure out how we were going to play on it so he came up with this harmonic idea. He said, "Play over this." And I said, "Henry, man.." He said, "It will be alright. Go ahead." He had a big grin on his face (laughter). So the cats start playing. I'm playing this thing and I'm growing ears like Dumbo trying to hear where I am and we come around. We finish and he asks, "How was that?" I said, "Man..." And that cats said that it sounded great. I said "Oh man!" And he said "You couldn't play your regular shit through that, right (laughter)?" I said "no." And he said "Good. Those are the chords we'll use." And that in a nutshell is Threadgill. That sums it up. Let's use these chords because these chords will take us someplace we haven't been.

The number system and the intervals are like that or can become like that. It's an open tonal system in that all sounds are equal. So everything becomes sound. It's a great accomplishment.

Interview with cellist Christopher Hoffman

September 24, 2014

The New School of Jazz Studies

Christopher Hoffman is a cellist who currently performs with Henry Threadgill's Zooid and several of his own projects. He is the newest member of Zooid. He also runs Hundred Pockets Records and teaches at the New School for Jazz & Contemporary Music. Mr. Hoffman has performed with Tony Malaby, Ingrid Laubrock, Marc Ribot, Jeremiah Cymerman and many others. He most recently scored the end credit music for Martin Scorsese's film *Shutter Island*.

Taylor: How did you get introduced to Threadgill's music?

Hoffman: I stole a sextett record from my college radio station because it had a cello player on it.

Taylor: Wow!

Hoffman: I was going through their records. I knew some guys who worked at the radio station and they were like, "No one plays any of those records." There was Julius Hemphill, Art Ensemble of Chicago stuff, so I found a sextet record with Deidre Murray. I didn't know who that was, so I took it.

Taylor: Nice. What was the name of the record?

Hoffman: *You Know the Number*.

Taylor: Oh, *You Know the Number*.

Hoffman: And then I kind of did some research. I knew Art Ensemble already, but it was all relatively new to me.

Taylor: And how did you start working with Threadgill?

Hoffman: He called Erik Friedlander who was a New York cello player and asked him for a recommendation. He wrote this piece for three cellos, tuba, drums and saxophone. He called Erik and Erik recommended me, Rueben Kodheli and Greg Heffernan. So I played that piece. That was performed at M.O.M.A. It was a summer garden thing and that was the first time I played with him. He already had his system.

Taylor: What year was this?

Hoffman: I believe it was 2005. It was pretty overwhelming and I got so nervous. There were other things going on that people weren't really adhering to. He really lays out a structure that you are supposed to follow and I felt like the other people weren't really doing it. I can play all my shit that I've come up with like the way they're doing, but that's not what he's asking us to do. So I was kind of bummed about that, but the concert was fun. At one point, he turned to me and yelled "Play!" He was intimidating. He was really nice, but when you first get to meet him, there's like a formality thing going on.

Taylor: Yeah, I've experienced that (laughter). And, so from that experience, did he immediately call you back and ask you to work with him?

Hoffman: No. In fact, he still used Tirik, the oud player, Liberty, Dana on cello and trombone, Jose and Elliot. So I think what happened was he first added Rueben as an additional cello player and then he got rid of both cellos altogether. Stomu couldn't play a gig at Wesleyan and Henry called me and asked me if I'd sub for him and learn the bass parts.

Taylor: Right, which is what I heard you doing at the Vanguard.

Hoffman: Totally. What night were you there?

Taylor: I don't remember.

Hoffman: Was Jose there?

Taylor: Yeah. It was amazing because you guys played all of my favorite Zooid compositions in one set. I was only there for one set.

Hoffman: That's great.

Taylor: I thought the sound of the band was really good at the Vanguard.

Hoffman: Yeah, we didn't have any stage issues with volume and stuff. It was cool. You played there before, right?

Taylor: Yeah, it's a fun room to play in. Let me go back and ask you about music in general. Is cello your first instrument?

Hoffman: Yeah.

Taylor: But you play other instruments besides cello, right?

Hoffman: I do. I play guitar tuned like a cello.

Taylor: Oh, wow.

Hoffman: I'm lazy (laughter). That's what my friends say. It's a different sound. I played electric bass for a while and I played drums. I have a family of drummers.

Taylor: Really?

Hoffman: I played drums from 5th grade through college. I play sometimes here and there, but not like professionally.

Taylor: When did you start cello?

Hoffman: I got started on Suzuki when I was five years old. I started out really young and I didn't really like it when I was growing up. It wasn't like something cool to do. I got teased for it at school, but my parents made me do it and they made me mow lawns to pay for the lessons.

Taylor: Man, really?

Hoffman: Yeah it was messed up.

Taylor: Did you go to music school?

Hoffman: Yep. I went to the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh. It had a Bachelor of Arts in recording so I enrolled in that program and did a double major with cello performance.

Taylor: Cool.

Hoffman: So then I went hardcore with the cello, trying to play cello concertos every semester.

Taylor: Oh man.

Hoffman: And I was just feeling destroyed all the time.

Taylor: And you spent some time in Chicago, too, right?

Hoffman: Yeah, I'm from Chicago. I grew up in Lombard.

Taylor: I never knew that.

Hoffman: My family is still out there in Naperville now. I went to school in Wisconsin during the school year and then I worked at Chicago Recording Company.

Taylor: Sure.

Hoffman: So, I worked there for two years before I came here.

Taylor: I'm sure you got some stories about your experience there. That's a huge recording studio.

Hoffman: Yeah, all sorts of stories. I was a normal intern at the main studio. I got to sit in on some sessions. They were pretty controlling about when they let people in, but it was interesting to see. I actually got upgraded to this door position where they paid me and I didn't have to come in and run lunches during the day, so that was a good thing I guess. Smashing Pumpkins was there all the time right at the end. I'm trying to think what other band was there. It was weird mix of music sessions that I came across.

Taylor: Right.

Hoffman: And then I worked at their other studio. They had a satellite branch at 55 West Wacker, a post production suite, and I worked on commercials for a year.

Taylor: Wow, interesting.

Hoffman: But as an associate engineer, I got paid minimum wage.

Taylor: That is a drag.

Hoffman: I worked with a great guy. I learned a lot. I learned that I didn't want to work in a studio (laughter).

Taylor: That's a great lesson. I know Liberty does a lot of the recordings for Threadgill. Have you ever worked on the recording end of things?

Hoffman: On the last record, I have like a co-mixing credit. Liberty's baby was just born, so he was feeling a little overwhelmed and Henry asked if I could go over and listen to the stuff with him. And actually, I was able to help out

with some things. Liberty is obviously a great mixer and stuff.

Taylor: So, you helped mix the last record?

Hoffman: I did, but it was very minimal in terms of my involvement. I caught one thing where I told him that I thought one of the overhead mic's was muted on this track. Surprised, he called me back and said, "Dude, you were right." But, I've mixed a bunch of stuff. I've just finished this Tony Malaby record that I play on, too. I've been doing that stuff on the side for a while now.

Taylor: What was the rehearsing process like when you did the last record?

Hoffman: We will usually rehearse 4 to 7 times before a performance. There is a pretty big book of charts now. I'm finally caught up for the most part having played all the pieces in the book. For a while, those guys already knew the music and Chris hasn't played. What part is he going to play? Sometimes, Threadgill will come in with new music that he wants to try out. Sometimes we work on them in rehearsal and we don't wind up playing them. Sometimes we'll play only a part of them. I brought some charts if you want to take a look at them.

Taylor: Thanks, man. How do you go about learning the material?

Hoffman: We usually phrase and loop the written material until that really starts to gel because it's usually pretty dense. It's very helpful to know what everybody else is doing.

Taylor: Do you learn other people's parts?

Hoffman: We don't actually swap parts, but you learn them because we loop the material so much. We loop the material until it's really happening, so it can go on

for a while.

Taylor: I imagine that the rehearsals are pretty long.

Hoffman: They're usually three to four hours. We usually work on stuff for an hour and a half take a break, usually a 20 or 30 minute break. It depends on what he's trying to accomplish. When we were first doing them, my head would actually ache after the rehearsal and there would be things that were caught in permanent loop in my head. I'd go to sleep I'd wake up thinking about one phrase just over and over and over again (laughter). It still happens. It's almost like mind control. I felt like I was getting inducted into this and just had to absorb it.

Taylor: That's wild. The music is very complicated and I've noticed that everyone has the music in front them in performances. Is it something that's impossible to have memorized?

Hoffman: I don't know if it's impossible to have it memorized, but because he likes to change the form all the time, you end up memorizing is the arrangement.

Taylor: Liberty explained that to me. If you have a Threadgill score but you don't know the arrangement, good luck. I've been trying to figure out the arrangement of *See the Blackbird Now*. I brought the chart. Do you mind if I pull it out?

Hoffman: No.

Taylor: In the arrangement of *See the Blackbird Now*, I believe it starts with you playing solo.

Hoffman: Yes, and then we start a loop. These two bars, when Stomu and

Liberty come in, the harmony is shifting and we do one pass of this and then one pass of this (points to chart).

Taylor: Are they alternating?

Hoffman: Yes, and then we play what is written. Is that what you have?

Taylor: The first five bars?

Hoffman: Yes.

Taylor: And then Threadgill starts the solo for the bass flute on the second bar of this section.

Hoffman: Yes, right down here. Maybe it goes to the second to last bar or something. Does it say?

Taylor: It shows eight bars only and then repeat.

Hoffman: Right, then repeat to the first bar and then that continues. And then Liberty plays this part.

Taylor: Is that open?

Hoffman: Correct, it is open. And then he cues and we start to play this (points to chart). A, B, C. It's a little confusing because I'm used to looking at my chart.

Taylor: Right.

Hoffman: So, we're playing A backwards, B backwards, and C forward and then that loops and goes into a trombone solo.

Taylor: The trombone solo is over the A section, but with some different things happening.

Hoffman: Correct. When we get to this part, we play the harmony during the solo and only when we are on our way out do we go back to this. And then we just

play the written material until the end.

Taylor: Do you have any idea how Threadgill derives these cells from the master cells?

Hoffman: I think Liberty has a handle on that. The thing about the cells is that you start to see them in different pieces. He definitely has it all worked out. I don't know for sure, but I think he has grids of them. He knows that this interval set works with this at the piano and he'll play some of these structures. Recently when he did, he started talking about this Elliot Carter Harmony book. Do you know about this book?

Taylor: No.

Hoffman: You should check it out. It's basically just pages and pages of these different sets of chords he was building that are based on intervals. There are some many different sections. It's deep. I bought it this summer. He has these four note chords, but then he has these three plus one note chords. The way that works is that there is one note that stays the same as three note chords shift around it. I think Threadgill is coming at it from that kind of space in a way. It's mathematical. But I don't know how he comes up with the original cells.

Taylor: When you're improvising, you're utilizing these intervals, right?

Hoffman: Yes.

Taylor: How strict is that?

Hoffman: When I first started playing in the group, usually out of nervousness and not knowing the material that well, I would start to play some stuff that was minor/major stuff that I learned playing jazz he would stop me. So, basically, what

I did to get over that was to have a loop station. I would play all three voices with whatever beats they had me playing and I would just loop them in my apartment. And I'd let them play all day long. I'd sit down and play to them for a while to a point where I felt that I could really do something with those three intervals. And I talked to the guys in the band about it because it seemed so overwhelming at first. They all kind of said the same thing, which was like pick one or two intervals and just focus on those. Once I started to get that happening, I came up with other things that work within the system. He was more tolerant of leaving it as is as well because it's not a hard and fast rule. Once he hears that you are in it, it's okay to break out of it.

Taylor: Oh, okay.

Hoffman: I remember one time in particular where he stopped the band, stood right in front of me, and played two intervals super loud over and over again really rhythmically. It sounded so great and told him that it was a cello and that it doesn't sound like that. I can't sound like that. It sounds amazing though. But all the time he would ask me to simplify it. He told me not to worry about trying to play everything. He would ask us to play something simple and move it around. That was helpful. And when you listen to him play, you start to hear that. He's not necessarily playing a lot of notes. He's playing phrases and a lot of rhythmic stuff, too. He talks a lot about having played in parades and stuff and you start to hear a little bit of that, too. There's sort of this rhythmic thing happening and you're realizing it's parade music.

Taylor: A lot of Zooid music is like dance music.

Hoffman: Totally.

Taylor: Atonal dance music!

Hoffman: Yep (laughter). It's so groovy.

Taylor: It's grooving, that's for sure. Now, sometimes you're playing the role of the bass and sometimes you're playing the role of the cello. What is your approach for doing both those things? Obviously, you are playing the root of the cells when you're playing the bass.

Hoffman: I played for a while when both Stomu and Jose were both in Zooid at the same time so I got to hear both of those guys share the role as the bass player. When Stomu was in it, they would really split up the solo forms evenly. Jose would take the first 4 bars and then they would swap voices and they'd work it out between the two of them.

Taylor: Wow!

Hoffman: I got to hear those guys do that. That was really the guidance I had. I've been put in the position of playing the bass before. I've definitely played gigs growing up where I've played walking bass lines. I know how to move around a little bit. And usually for me, Jose is like a monster. He is jumping up and down all over the place. I tend to play more rhythmically and stay down low.

Taylor: They're two totally different instruments.

Hoffman: Yeah. It's a different mindset because when I'm playing a middle voice, like a cello, I tend to think more in phrases and I can listen as the harmony goes by and interject things. With the bass, you have to lay it down. If somebody gets off or if somebody drops a beat, you're usually going to

lock back in to the bass voice.

Taylor: One thing I've noticed trying to decode this music is that without the bass, you have no reference point. Everybody is relying on you. That's a hard role.

Hoffman: Yeah, another hard thing is trying not to play anything cliché or generic-sounding. When I first had to do that, I realized that I was not walking bass lines. Jose has a funny story about that. He first starting playing with Henry and it was him and perhaps Muhal also playing. Anyway, Henry turned to them and said B,D,F. Jose said, "What the hell does that mean?" They started playing and he started just walking a tuba bass line in B diminished. Henry turned around to him and said, "You can play anything but that. Play anything, but don't ever play that. Don't walk a bass line like that!" So that pinged in my head forever. It does not really work anyway. It sounds strange. The concept of swinging on the cello doesn't really connect with me. There are people who do it well. There's some early stuff with Oscar Pettiford, but it's like a bass player playing the cello.

Taylor: Yeah, with Ron Carter, it's the same thing.

Hoffman: That's that thing. I don't need to do that. They're badasses and they did it, so why should I try to replicate that?

Taylor: Are you playing with Threadgill this weekend in the *Very Very Threadgill Festival*?

Hoffman: Yeah, I'm doing Sextet and Situation Society Dance Band.

Taylor: Nice!

Hoffman: Yeah, I'm really excited about the Sextet stuff. I get to play a bunch of pieces I've heard, but never thought I would get to play.

Taylor: That's awesome.

Interview with drummer Elliot Humberto Kavee

October 13, 2014

Coffee Shop, East Village

Drummer/cellist/composer Elliot Humberto Kavee is a current member of Zooid. He has performed with Francis Wong, Omar Sosa, Joseph Jarman, Steve Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, Ben Goldberg, John Tchicai, Glenn Horiuchi, Jon Raskin, Elliot Sharp, Tim Berne, Jon Jang, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Vijay Iyer and many others. Kavee's self-titled 1997 solo debut showcased his polytimbral/polyrhythmic drumming talents.

Taylor: When did you start studying percussion?

Kavee: I took a percussion workshop during the summer of 8th grade. I was in the orchestra in Junior High School. I was a cellist.

Taylor: So you start studying cello first?

Kavee: Yes, but I always wanted to play drums. It's funny. I got talked into playing the cello and then the orchestra got a drum set and then I started playing the drums. The orchestra teacher approved of that, but said that I should study also. Since she was bringing the percussion into the orchestra, she was taking a summer workshop. So, I enrolled in that. That workshop was run by Anthony Cirone. He wrote the drum etudes that a lot of people study, so he is really a big deal as an educator. There was a drum teacher there named Charles Dowd. He passed away actually.

Taylor: What school was this?

Kavee: This was a summer workshop that was held at a college in the South

Bay and was run by Cirone. I think he just basically got a facility where he was able to teach. But it was his program. I took that for one summer and then I got a drum set and started playing to records. But, I was playing to records before that. I had a little mock-up thing with bongos and a tambourine. I was playing along to 70's radio. The second summer I went back to the workshop, Cirone suggested a drum teacher that was in the Bay Area named Gorge Marsh. He's a drummer and an educator out of there. He is the guy that really got me going in terms of studying the drum set outside of studying orchestrally etudes, like Stones Stick Control. He got me excited about something that he created.

The name is a little funny. It's called inner drumming. The background is that he studied a lot of Tai Chi at that time. He had a back problem that could not be resolved by Western doctors, so while he was doing Tai Chi, he developed this system that was based on no resistance. Now, this system is talked about by Freddie Grubber. He was a little later, but this was back in the 1970's. It is this system where the basic stroke uses gravity and lets the stick rebound, so it is kind of his "perpetual motion" where the input of your energy is minimal.

I think it is actually great that I got that then because I think if I had gotten the drum set earlier, I might have developed these bad habits. This guy started me off with this technique that had all kinds of relaxation built into it. He also had a system where you would visualize things, scan your body, and see if there is any tension. He developed this exercise which was a non-repetitive four limb pattern that was twelve beats, but you just work with one pair in the exercise. Eventually you get to a groove where you start to visualize energy going through

limbs. So, that was the first training.

His idea was to create a sort of classical system for the drum set where it is codified specifically for the drum set which is a four limb instrument. The drum set and the organ are pretty much the only instruments that can be codified this way and he was trying to deal with that specific issue. The pedagogy of the snare drum is all worked out. There is a whole scholarly school for the ride cymbal. At that time, I was also checking out a lot of music. The Keystone Korner was at its peak, and I was able to go in there underage.

Taylor: What year are we talking about?

Kavee: This was the late 1970's. Everybody would come through there at that time. So, I would go in and sit up front. I would be there and Max Roach would be three feet in front of me.

Taylor: Wow.

Kavee: I would also go to Great American Music Hall in San Francisco and I would be right up front. I remember this one time I saw Elvin Jones and the Jazz Machine. I was sitting by his ride cymbal which was right in front of my head and I had this perfect view of each limb and everything was really delicate actually. Sometimes you hear things off record that are kind of compressed. Most of the time everything is just delicate and every once in a while, he would lay into the cymbal. I saw Art Blakey and Billy Higgins, too. He would play and actually look you in the eye and connect with you.

Taylor: Yeah, he sure did.

Kavee: So, that was a lot of the education that I got, too. And then I ended up

going to Cal. Arts and that was when I started studying West African Music.

Taylor: What specific West African music were you studying?

Kavee: This was Ewe music. So, the Ladzekpo were an Ewe family. Their lineage went back to the 1600's. Their family actually composed a lot of these pieces. So, I was studying that pretty seriously. I was also taking tabla lessons and I was studying Sargam. Basically, I was a world music major. I was also studying Gamelan. I was doing the Balinese and the Javanese gamelan. The Baliinese gamelan was pretty fast and they had a drumming thing that had an interlocking pattern where everything is an eighth note later. This is one eighth note displaced (does demonstration).

There were a bunch of students that were there before. They were not all percussion majors but they were there for a while. There was this one brilliant guy named Zimmerman who was an illustrator and could visualize things differently. We were always kind of geeking out with graph paper because you were not supposed to write anything down in the class. We wouldn't bring tape recorders because they had gotten burned before.

Ladzekpo got burned by a student who tape recorded a class. It was fine, but the guy was part of a rock band that was pretty big and they got Ladzekpo to open for them. That resulted in them using part of a Ledzekpo song as the lead in to one cut on a record. So, they worked it out, but they said that they would forgive, but they would not forget. The solution was no more tape recorders and that's how they dealt with that. I got a lot of ear training from them because it was variations on the Sogo, second to the lead drum. Eventually I got to do some of

the lead drum. The second drum included variations on this piece called *Gahu*.

Taylor: I know *Gahu*.

Kavee: There are many variations. One of the teachers was a chief and he was actually a student at Columbia University too. Kobla Ladzekpo was a dancer mostly and Alfred, his brother, was a guy who did most of the drumming. He was an instructor at Columbia University in the 1960's and Steve Reich actually took classes from him, so he was learning the interlocking rhythm. So we would play and one time, he showed me one variation and then he showed me a second one while the whole piece is going. He kept on sending me more and more variations and I was just tracking with him while he was sending it so, that was sort of the idea, to send this music without writing it. It was about movement and interlocking. It was not about how it would look on paper.

People have done things with circles, wheels, and graphs and it does make sense to a certain degree, but basically it is really going to come down to similarity and alternation, hitting together or hitting apart, and the dancing. I was really terrible at the dancing, but I had to learn. They called me "Crocker." They would say "Crocker, go dance!" and after a couple seconds, they would say, "Okay, Crocker. Go back and play the drums (laughter). You are exempt." So I got a pass on some of the dancing. But, I had to do some of it. It is a strange thing as it is this dance that deals with your spine. It has this "energy center reality" to it in terms of where the drumming comes from. When you are drumming, you are internalizing that movement a little bit and syncing it with the dancer.

Taylor: Is their independence in the dance itself?

Kavee: Not too much, but there is a little bit. With this particular dance, you had to move your arms back with your spine back and then your feet move in one, two, three, four, but with alternating feet. So, that is how it was a four. It was not just two two's. It was an actual cycle of four. And then it is a circle dance. The other thing about these pieces is that they were performed usually only once or twice a year. They were all ritual pieces. In addition, they were all based on Bergen text. Every rhythm is based on a verse. We did not always learn them.

They would tell us what the meanings of the phrases were (sings rhythm). I would ask for an explanation. They would tell me that they did not know as it goes back too far. I would spend a lot of my time with that. Then, John Burgima was the percussion instructor, so we were playing a lot of 20th century pieces. Then, he wrote some Zappa-like things I would play drum set with that. Do you know about this drummer Jonathan Norton? He played with The Eels. He plays with Lucinda Williams now as her drummer.

Taylor: No.

Kavee: He was going there the same time I was. We were friends and we used to play a lot of dance classes together. One time, we got asked to play for a dance recital. We had this array of percussion. We needed a bass sound, so that is the first time I played cello with the drums at the same time.

Taylor: I heard about that.

Kavee: So, that is the first time I did that.

Taylor: Did you record a CD where you are playing cello with percussion?

Kavee: Yes, I did in 1996. The other thing that was going on was learning this interlocking concept from the Balinese. It was usually with two elements from the tallafon (sings part), which has three things going. It is going one direction 4 way spots then you go backwards, so that makes a cycle, but it is splitting the two parts (sings example) and then you have to mute it in between. So it is a sense of on/off and these parts linking together.

Taylor: And then you would do it backwards?

Kavee: Yes, because what happens if you go 4 times in this direction and then go back (sings example)? That's actually the underlying structure. The other thing was playing Javanese gamelan. I do not know if you have heard that. It can be really slow.

Taylor: Right.

Kavee: If you are playing the main gong, you are waiting for this cycle to come around where I was about nineteen or something and was bored. This whole idea of a large cycle. It is funny you are asking this question and I am just talking about these particular things. Interestingly enough, they all kind of play into playing with Threadgill.

Taylor: I am getting that.

Kavee: Right (laughter)? I guess that's why those things occurred to me. A lot of those things occurred to me at Cal Arts. Then, we would also do this thing where we would say with seven beats, "How many variations on/off and how many different ways can you play a septuplet?" We would map it out using graph paper - a seven-beat cycle, or twenty eight beats, and we would divide it up.

Another thing was the Tihi from Indian music. In this case, you repeat something three times and then the last note of the third repetition is the downbeat. The simplest one is this (sings example).

Lyonesse and I would geek out on this thing as we wanted to figure it out. We would create a formula for every Tihi for every time cycle. We came up with this numeric formula if you have seventeen beats. This is how it would work out so the last beat comes back on the down beat. Then, we took it further and said that if you wanted to do any repetition of anything, it is sixty-seven beats and you want to have a beat repeat seven times as well as all of the variations of that. Eventually, it came down to an algorithm, so basically a numeric system. To me, those are all seeds of eventually “getting” to Threadgill. When I left Cal Arts, I had all this stuff in my mind, but I did not have a compositional way to interpret them at the time to do anything with the “stuff.” And “world music,” when I was out there was a little corny.

A big thing in San Francisco was “world beat.” People would come out and play African instruments and play (sings back beat), so all of this stuff would be going on, but it would be above this dance beat. That is great, but that is what I would have been doing. You could do that behind a songwriter, so you could do that behind anybody. It was not something that was specific to using that material. I would not have used that material. It would have been like what I could have used if I had gotten to play with Prince for five years (laughter). Then, I could use it. So there is that. A lot of things happened and when I got to Threadgill, the foundation was established as valuable things I had learned at Cal

Arts. I really believe that.

Taylor: When did you come to New York?

Kavee: I came to New York in 1998. So, I did a whole series in San Francisco.

In the early 1990's, there was a "new jazz" thing that was happening there that got some play. Even out here, we got to play in the 1990's for The Knitting Factory Festival.

Taylor: What "new jazz" scene are you talking about? Steve Coleman?

Kavee: It was partly that, because when I was there I was with a theatre group for a little while, Mind Troupe. I did the writing, acting, musical direction composition, and stuff like that. I was really involved with that. Then, I started playing out more in the Bay Area because I was up in Sonoma County for awhile, too, and that is where I met Liberty Ellman. I helped build the Jazz Department a little bit as a student. I helped build that up and then Ellman was going through that when I met him. I met him twenty-four years ago in 1990.

Taylor: Oh, wow.

Kavee: He might tell you this story because I was in this band called Frame, and this pretty talented young sax player, who now plays saxophone with Boz Scaggs, does a lot of keyboard stuff with him. Dave McNab is a guitar player who does a lot of theatre stuff in the Bay Area. So we had a band up in Sonoma County. So a lot of people were coming to come check us out, so Liberty came by and the first time I met him we played and we finished and I was packing up my drums and he said, "My name is Liberty Ellman and I want to play with you (laughter)." I was like "wow, alright." I always joke about that because since

then, we've gotten to do all these amazing things. Steve Coleman came to the Bay Area in 1994. So there was a lot of buzz about this player and then he set up in a house in Oakland for a month and he invited anyone who wants to play with to come. So it was him, Gene Lake, David Gilmore...

Taylor: David Gilmore?

Kavee: No, I don't think so. I think that was before. It was pretty cool because we got to go over and play and actually we went over as Frame (Eric, Dave, and me) and he played with us for like four hours. This is after I came over and watched some rehearsals and stuff. And then he hired me to do this thing called Mystic Rhythm Society which is the debut of this band. We played at Yoshi's so I got to play with Gene Lake. That was intense. That was amazing. So we did that and around the same time, Cecil Taylor came out. That's around the time I was playing with Francis Wong also, so I started to do some things with Asian Improv Arts and Francis and I started doing a lot of work together.

Taylor: I know Francis.

Kavee: Yeah, you recorded a record with Francis and Tatsu.

Taylor: Yeah.

Kavee: So, we did that. We were playing a lot and then Cecil Taylor came in and organized an orchestra. I think he got Lilse Ellis to get the players together. I was playing cello in that. We did a recording and a rehearsal. That was really amazing, too, because his system was more cellular. The time wasn't so laid out. It was like, "ok, we are playing this pitch, this pitch, this pitch, and this pitch." That was an interesting thing organizing counterpoint where everything had a

time shift, so that affected my thinking with Francis and me. We used to do a lot of compositions where there was a melody, but it was more like a pitch sequence and the rhythm does what it's doing.

And around that time was when I first started playing with Vijay Iyer and Liberty Ellman in this band called Poisonous Prophets. We had this one group and that's after we played one track on Vijay's first record. I think the track might have been called that. We used to do things in a lot of different time cycles. We used to rehearse for hours and hours. I remember our schedules were really busy so we would do rehearsal between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. We would just go over these time cycles over and over and over. So that was an interesting thing, too.

Now there are some younger minds showing up and I was finally able to utilize some of stuff I've been working on in an organic way without trying to superimpose it on somebody's music. This was something that was actually part of the structure of this music. It wasn't an add on. That was a great thing. I bunch of us moved out to New York at the same time, around 1998. That's when Vijay and I hooked up with Fieldwork and started doing more work with these repeating cycles. We would take something in 7/4 or something in 13/4 or something in 11/4 and perceive it differently in a different grouping.

When I began working with Threadgill I started to see the way he was thinking. A lot of times it was beat to beat, because it's all laid out. It's all built in so you don't have to be thinking about everything, it's all built in the structure. But also this idea that a lot of times thinking of the odd bars as being based in 3. Think of everything based more in 3 than based in 2. That really helps.

Taylor: That's interesting.

Kavee: That's the thing! That's what helps that give the music a round character, where the 3's and 2's are variations of 2's and 1's. So if your exploiting the beat into 2's and 1's you could do it in 3's and 2's and it will still have a similar kind of thing, where it's not A A (claps 2 eighth notes) ... there's already swing and groove but it's asymmetrical within the beat. And then hearing a 3 and a 2 like it's a 2 and a 1. And hearing a 3, a 2 and a 2, like it's a 2 and a 1. 7/4 can feel like a 4/4. 11/4 can feel like a 7/4. If you have 2, 2, 2, 1 it can be 3, 3, 3, 2.

Modern Drummer got an interview with me and they asked me about playing 7 as if it's an 11, and I break it down. They had me do three other articles and it breaks down the whole thing.

Taylor: Wow, I didn't know about that.

Kavee: Yeah, there are three more articles. If you go to my website and scroll down it will say articles. If you click on that you will be able to view them. This concept is something I really ran with because there is another thing that Henry always talks about with rhythm. For him it's all about longs or shorts.

That's a very simple thing, long and shorts. That means the foundation of all these phrases are asymmetrical. They are all not evenly divided. They are different lengths on the frame but it's fundamentally built from those cells, a long thing and then a shorter one. That really got my mind thinking in terms of what meter is because then you're really free to hear a meter in different ways like hearing an 11 as a 7 because if it's a group of longs and shorts.

There was a guy who wrote a letter to Modern Drummer and said I don't

understand because 3 and 3 and 2 equals 8. How can that be 5? (sings example to show how they are the same). Me and the editor were trying to be poetic with all this information but this time I broke it down and said listen, if you make 8 over 5 and divide it into 40 beats and plot out where every beat lines up, you'll find that the the 4th and the 7th beat line up and where the 3rd and the 5th beat line up is really close. That's what we're doing all the time. We're grooving, we're swinging, but here's always a time variation, it's usually a minor one. But within this 40 beats at that speed it's milliseconds. So for all intents and purposes it is the same rhythm. But I kind of held back on that because it was a lot of information. I never broke it down that way because no one really asked and it was also a theory I was working with so people were coming with me with all these challenges.

This guy said he went to his percussion instructor and he said an 11 can't be a 7. I said good, if a theory can't withstand a challenge it's not worth it. It made me analyze it more and then I could prove it. An 11 actually can be a 7 and vis versa. You can hear a 7 like it's an 11, you could hear a 5 like it's a 3, 3, 2 only really laid back (sings example).

You hear all these music but 90 percent of the music has some type of variation in there. There is some music that is perfectly metronomic but most music isn't. It takes advantage of all of the ambiguity. The point of this whole thing that the editor really helped bring out was that there are these ambiguities that we can use...

Taylor: And manipulate?

Kavee: Manipulate. Yeah, because it's manipulating the audience perception and reframing your perception to hearing things differently. That's another thing I did too was to say well what if it's real slow and there's a bar of 7/4 and then a bar of 5/4 (claps example). I did a lot of work with that so I could hear a bar of 7/4 and a bar of 5/4 as a big 7, and really hear it. At first your just fooling yourself but eventually it will click in.

That takes a lot of repetition. We're always rehearsing. We rehearse a lot. I'm sure Liberty told you we rehearse a lot. I kind of did the playing with everybody thing when I was in San Francisco so I was really focused on playing original music when I came to New York. So whenever I get a call to do something, I really take this music and spend a lot of time with it and make something of it. I take it apart. If it seems like I'm just spinning my wheels I let go but usually I find something, some way of working with it so it will yield something deeper within the structure. So that's what happened with this. This arrangement of meters gave me the idea: ok, what if you take these real slow fundamental relationships and hear them differently? Instead of playing the variation, it's really about hearing it differently ...

Taylor: It's a subtle thing.

Kavee: Yeah, it's subtle. That was part of the work with it too. Another thing I would spend time with is breaking things up. If something is in 7, I worked on all the different ways you can break it up, and all the things you can put over it. I think with Henry's aesthetic a lot of times it's not so much about adding but more about variations and manipulations and ornamentation. It's more about taking

fundamental's and moving them. That's something he seems to go for. We seem to see eye to eye on that. If someone's playing, it usually falls off the grid a little and when everyone starts to get to that point that's when it really starts to happen.

Taylor: When did you first get introduced to Threadgill's music and how did you and Threadgill meet?

Kavee: The saxophone player in the band Frame had a copy of *Rag Bush* and I heard that. I saw him play in 1996 when I was out at the Knitting Factory with this San Francisco weekend thing that they had. We were playing downstairs, there were a couple of bands. Peter Applebaum was there with his thing and I was playing with Jessica Jones. Jessica brought me up to hear Threadgill. That was Make a Move so it was him and J.T., Stomu and Brandon. It was unbelievable. The next year I came back and I think I might have seen him. I think Toby Williams was the drummer. Make a Move was kind of in transition at that point. I had my solo cd and I actually gave it to him (laughter). I don't even know if he remembers. Then when I moved here I did a gig with Vijay in the band Fieldwork, this was the second gig we did as Fieldwork with Aaron Stewart. I didn't know this but off to our right was Threadgill, Muhal, and Andrew Hill. checking us out. I had no idea that they were there.

So I finished playing and then Threadgill came up to me and introduced himself. He complemented me and said he really liked what I was doing. He had already started Zooid with Dafnis and I think I saw them before this Fieldwork gig.

I had a gig with Rudresh and he came and checked that out and said hi, and then I played this gig with Liberty, a trio gig. He used to have this trio gig on the west side. One of the guys from the Soprano's owned the club.

Taylor: I remember...

Kavee: You remember that joint?

Taylor: Liberty told me about it.

Kavee: I can't remember the name of the place but Derrick Phillips was the drummer and he couldn't make it, so Liberty hired me. Everything felt really great that night. The place was packed it was his birthday. And again I didn't know Threadgill was there. Every time, I didn't know he was there. And so we finished playing and I sat down at the table and he came over and said I'm going to call you (laughter). I was so happy. What happened was Dafnis couldn't make this record release party at the Knitting Factory nor could he play a gig at the Saalfelden festival, which I couldn't do either. I was already booked. So Horatio Hernandez did that one. After that they came back and we played the Knitting Factory ,and I remember right before I had a gig in Japan and I was on the plane studying the scores. It was a long flight and I remember Dave Kikoski was on that flight and he walked by and said "What's that?" I didn't know if Threadgill's stuff is proprietary so I said nothing. I'm not going to blow this gig I haven't played yet. So I got to see one rehearsal with Horatio Hernandez playing. That was nice.

He's really a nice guy. He played off the score because at that time the score's had more drum parts written out, like a kick snare thing on some things and multi percussion sort of orchestral type of things. So that's where it started;

hearing the records and having the charts. The thing about that first Zooid record is, it didn't really use the system. So that's why he'll not necessarily talk about that record because really that was a different book.

Actually Make a Move had a couple pieces that used the system and then the Zooid record didn't use the system. This thing really didn't start until I joined the band. I ended up playing three nights at the Knitting factory and then that was it. He kept me on. That was September 2001. That was it and then we were off to the races. The recording we did was in 2003. That was the vinyl record. That was released in 2005.

Taylor: Did you make an effort to check out Dafnis's playing or were you more just doing your own thing.

Kavee: I did. I did do my thing. What happened was I heard him and I could tell right off the bat that he's a very different drummer. His approach is very different. I heard the records, I listened to the tapes, and then eventually I got off of that and pulled the numbers off of the charts and ran the hell out of them. That's what I really worked with. So I decoupled the material from the charts...

Taylor: Just figuring out measure to measure what's happening?

Kavee: Yeah because he had it laid out. So I'm sure you now about this, a lot of times say a cycle of 31 the guys might have two bars of 7 a bar of 5 and then two 3's and a 6. That'll be their thing and then my thing might be four 7's and a 3.

Taylor: Something totally different.

Kavee: So my down beats are different, so it's already built into the structure that the down beats don't line up. So what happens it gives the listener the feeling

that there is no meter.

Taylor: No downbeat at all?

Kavee: No down beat at all. So it's just built in. But I was already one of those guys who didn't like to play the down beat. It wasn't a grey thing, it was something that I aesthetically liked, not hitting the down beat all of the time. Sometimes you play for people and they want to hear the downbeat.

Taylor: Threadgill didn't want that?

Kavee: No. When we are rehearsing we are defining everything to get the whole cycle, but once it happens he doesn't want to be hearing the downbeat. So that was actually a great thing where aesthetically somebody really wants that which is a great thing to learn. If you feel something just because some people won't like it doesn't mean it's not going to be right for a certain situation. Maybe a better situation. The other thing that happened was I could see he wants me to play these cycles that are different from the other guys, but have the same form. Let's say for example a cycle of 31. There are all the variations of how you can divide that up. So I just worked like crazy so I could really hear the cycle of 31. You look at it so many different ways so that it becomes second nature.

Taylor: So you're not thinking about it any more.

Kavee: No. It's a little bit like that training I had at Cal Arts where you hear it and it's not marked down on paper. I utilized a lot of the work that I was doing with Vijay, where we were just running cycles over and over. It's almost like when you look at a word, and you repeat it so much that it doesn't mean anything anymore (laughter). It starts to mean something else. The thing that

was different with Threadgill was these long cycles. That's what was new for me. I'm repeating this bar of 13/8 and it's within 5 seconds, this thing is lasting maybe a minute and it's got to do the same thing. It's got to come around. That was similar to the Javanese music I was studying. The long cycle but then you are doing things inside of it. The long view and then the short view.

Taylor: Have you memorized all of the charts.

Kavee: Yes.

Taylor: That's the impression I got.

Kavee: Yep.

Taylor: I know that has to be challenging too because the form is always changing.

Kavee: That's it. Threadgill is never arbitrary. When he does a variation it makes sense. So the deeper you know the material, then he will do a variation of that and your like, I get it.

Taylor: It's not a big deal.

Kavee: It won't be out of the blue. It will be a variation on something we know, so it will make sense. "Oh, ok, so we are going to take this and then we are going to go over here, and then we are going to do this and then go to that instead." I'll write it down and have to follow it the first couple of times.

Sometimes I'll be like I got it, because I know it and I can take something away and delete it mentally. It's really about the repetition and also looking at things from many different angles. The other thing that helped me deal with the asymmetry was going through them really fast. If it's two 7's and a 5 (sings

example), I know it's long. long short. I'll compress it and then de-compress it, seeing the shape of it. It's really just training.

I know the guys are training with intervals, with the intervallic material. The whole thing is intervallic because the whole thing that's making the rhythm work together is shifting the intervals between the downbeats. Even if it is implied and we are not playing them, there is a rise and fall to everything that makes it work. if it was literally meter less, than the music wouldn't do anything, it would be like jumping up and down.

Taylor: Did Threadgill give you much direction as far as texture and orchestration with the kit?

Kavee: Yeah. That's a good thing too. First of all he gave me the scores so when we rehearse I'd say ok I'm going to be going along with the tuba part until we repeat, next time I'll go with the guitar part. In terms of texture, we did this one recording session where he had me bring all my cymbals and say try this cymbal on this song. I used a different ride cymbal on every track. He'll do things where he'll say ok this time you're just using two parts of the kit. They're pretty basic things. This orchestration thing he'll talk a lot about that.

The great thing about Threadgill with the conducting and the counting off is that he'll do things with his body that will give you a sense where the eight notes are. Certain pieces will tip and he'll count them that way. Other ones will fall a different way and he'll give a cue of that. It's something that you are not going to necessarily write out, but he can convey it. He's talked about this too, just this idea of band leading. First of all casting is important. You should pick

someone who you want to work with and let them do what they are going to do. He give's people a lot of room. You can stumble and make mistakes. He'll see what he is dealing with and then he will start shaping it. He's really patient. He's just letting do my thing. He see's everything thats happening and then he says ok maybe this is a habit. I'm going to take that away. The orchestration is not what to hit but what you are leaning on. He leans on his a lot. He likes to do this. You can't do that now. What do you do now?

Taylor: Yeah.

Kavee: You're right at the edge. He wants us at the edge all the time. If we are too rehearsed at something, he'll change it. It sounds great but it's too perfect in a way. We nailed it. It's going to get worst from here in a certain way. It's too refined. We'll start again and he'll change something and break it up, That's a lot of what the rehearsal has been. He'll say, "No bass drum on this one." " No Cymbals." A lot of times really broad strokes. Sometimes he'll come up and just sing something to me and I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm sounding ten times better. It's a bit like transmitting information.

Taylor: Do you have a specific approach to tuning your drums with Zoid?

Kavee: For the Vanguard he had me tune to the cello. That was great. Before, he wasn't giving me a lot of tuning direction. When I was in San Francisco I had these different sets of drums and I used to tune every thing differently and finally I just said I am just going to settle on one sound. I remember one time I just let my floor tom loosen. I had an emperor head on it and I just kept loosening it until it sounded like the lowest thunder. At one point I was doing a lot of that. I

had that going for a while. I'm not using that anymore, but I used that for years. And then I had the snare drum tuned ... it went through variations. He wouldn't really say much about the tuning,

Taylor: What's your approach to rehearsal's?

Kavee: There's different types of rehearsing. One is rehearsing a new piece and another is going over stuff we already know how to play. There's a piece we played at the Vanguard, *So Pleased, No Clue*, and we've been playing that since 2004. It's gone through a lot of changes. It used to be something that had a long dense drum solo and then every thing was really fast and full. Then it became the photo negative of that where everything was just space. So if it's a piece we've played before a lot of times, rehearsing will be trying to find a different angle on how to approach it.

For me, rehearsing is searching for something with the timing or the tempo or the time placement and finding something else new within it. With a new piece I will have the full score and I will sync up with one of the parts to get a sense of it and then that will change. Usually when we're rehearsing I will play the bars that they have instead of crossing the bar line. It's too much in the beginning. Eventually I'll start introducing my bars over it, and then different variations of that. Once it's not lined up it's kind of like the cat's out of the bag at that point. At that point I can try anything and see if it works. Certain things will lay well and other things won't. I'll see what works another way of dividing it up that feels right. And then Threadgill will call out numbers sometimes. "This is 21, I want this 5,5,5,6." while the band is doing 10 and 11. He's hearing these things

and will have us try them out.

A lot of the rehearsal is getting the material really clear the way it is written. We start really literal with the material and then we internalize it. Then there's the point when we really start to hear it. That's when it starts to take off. The rhythmic information and the harmonic shifts because the guys have these cells that are changing, that's mostly the rhythm for them especially when we go into long meter. What I'm doing is crossing outside of that. Dividing the beat in a different way. That's the basic trajectory; going from a literal reading of it to the point where it will take off.

There have been pieces we've done where we played them once and that was it. He's not precious. He'll write a piece and if for some reason it doesn't work, he'll just let it fall off. There some pieces we stopped playing and never recorded. He's so prolific you know. And then there will be something that just grabs hold and we'll play it for 10 years.

Taylor: When you figure out a drum part that works do you stay with that or are you constantly improvising?

Kavee: The improvisation for me is changing and shifting within that cycle. Sometime they're things that I'll always play the same. There is usually a marker, sometimes with the tuba, there's a certain point... you hear it in there...

Taylor: Yeah, and you hear those little hooks!

Kavee: Yeah it's like a fanfare. I'm probably always going to be hearing 3 plus 1 or whatever. Then we are off and it can go into this other thing.

Taylor: Yeah these little hooks happen so fast you can't really call them a hook.

Kavee: Exactly, they're micro hooks. Sometimes we will make a mistake in rehearsal and he will say lets do a vamp of that. It was a mistake but lets make something out of it. There is a Thelonious Monk story where after playing a gig someone said to Monk "What's wrong?" and he said "I played the wrong mistake (laughter). He brings that story up a lot because sometimes it's like if that hadn't gone wrong... and that's the thing when your spending so much time and rigor on something you can cut yourself a little slack. We have to loosen up or else it won't sound the way it's suppose to sound.

Interview with guitarist Liberty Ellman**February 27th, 2012****Residence, Fort Greene, Brooklyn**

Guitarist Liberty Ellman's is a current member of Zooid. He has performed with, Wadada Leo Smith, Myra Melford, Greg Osby, Butch Morris, Vijay Iyer, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Steve Lehman, Stephan Crump, Marty Erlich and Joe Lovano. As a composer and bandleader, Ellman has produced 3 critically acclaimed CDs: Orthodoxy, Tactiles and Ophiuchus Butterfly. Liberty has also been active in the studio, mixing and mastering recordings for a wide variety of artists including Steve Coleman, Henry Threadgill, Sam Rivers, Steve Lehman, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, Gregory Porter (Grammy nominated), Wadada Leo Smith, Amir Elsaaffar, Ralph Alessi, Joel Harrison, Tyshawn Sorey, and many others.

Taylor: You were born in London and then you came to the states?

Ellman: Actually my mother is American. She's from New Jersey. When she was 14 or 15, she was hanging out in the scene in New York because she was a musician.

Taylor: What kind of musician?

Ellman: She was a folk singer, played guitar, and a little piano. When she was in high school she started coming into the city freaking her mom out by not coming home and all that kind of stuff. That was the 60's when a lot of stuff was happening, so she was a good singer actually and ended up hooking up. She

was hanging out with Band of Gypsies and stuff like that.

She became a good friend of Hendrix and met all kind of musicians, so she went over to London for a couple years because the music scene there was so hot. She was hanging out with Led Zeppelin.

Taylor: Wow!

Ellman: Yeah talking to her I'm not cool at all. When I hang out with my mom, I am just like, "Yeah I know mom." She's like, "It's too bad your uncle Jimmy couldn't hear you play." I'm like, "I know mom." Yeah, she has a lot to talk about. Anyway, that's why we were there basically because she was just checking out London at that time. She had a boyfriend there and had me, but when I was born, she wanted to go home and see what's up. She came back to New York and then married a guy named Kevin Ellman who became my dad. They got married when I was 2.

He was a studio drummer and also played with Todd Rundgren's Utopia Band. I don't know if you've heard of them, but they were one of the early American progressive rock bands. They did cool stuff and it's funny because when I think back, that music is some of the first music I ever heard, the band Utopia. They had odd time signatures and all sorts of different quirky stuff. They used different types of runs and it was pretty cool.

Taylor: Is it easy to get a hold of that music?

Ellman: There's some stuff on YouTube. The most famous record is a record called *Utopia*. It has an eye in the middle. It's got some date on it. It sounds somewhere between Yes and Rush and Zappa and that stuff. yo Some of it is

actually pretty cool. Some of it is kind of psychedelic.

Psychedelic is fine, but you hear it. The point is that the music really influenced me more than I knew. I remember that we had a loft in Soho right across from Roulette. We had the whole floor and my dad had a sound proof studio in there with his drums. He actually had one of those Vistalite kits while he was in Utopia.

Taylor (laughter): Wow!

Ellman: So he had this huge blue, I think it was blue, drum set that was massive. That was actually how I first started playing because he would show me how to play.

Taylor: So, you played drums first?

Ellman: Yeah. I never got serious, but I wish I had.

Taylor: But that was your introduction into...

Ellman: That was my first instrument. I think that definitely influenced me rhythmically in how I hear music. We had all kinds of musicians come through the house over the years. Taj Mahal, for example, and just all these people who were friends of the family. It was an interesting life, but then after they split up, I went to California with my mom.

Taylor: How old were you?

Ellman: I think I was 10, and in 5th grade. That was a whole new world moving out to California. We were in Mill Valley. Which is...

Taylor: I know Mill Valley. I'm sure back then it was much different.

Ellman: Yeah, back then there were a lot of hippies, a bus depot, and a lot

of kids skateboarding. The last head shop finally closed just recently. There was a head shop and a great club called Sweetwater which I think just reopened actually. That was a great place to hear music. I mean, it had so much vibe back then.

Now it's like Switzerland or something (laughter). But the beauty is still there. Maybe I wouldn't live in Mill Valley, but I would live in Fairfax if I went back. I don't know if you have spent any time there, but that's where all the hippies are. That's where all the music is. They have six clubs in Fairfax.

Taylor: Wow!

Ellman: It's crazy. And actually a lot of great musicians. There not doing to much creative jazz improvisational stuff, but in terms of blues and rock and that kind of thing, there are some great players.

Taylor: Nice.

Ellman: So anyway, I was playing guitar probably...

Taylor: 1980?

Ellman: It must have been 1981. That's when I first went out there. It would have been 1982 or 983 when I really started picking up guitar. I also played a little saxophone.

Taylor: What made you pick up guitar?

Ellman: Well, it's interesting. It must have been Prince (laughter).

Taylor: That'll do it.

Ellman: I just started getting into music and the pop culture of the time. My mom was always playing Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix and a really great collection of music. She had everything and she played it all the time in the house. I was

always hearing guitar and I didn't have a drum set.

I was playing a little saxophone at school for like a year in middle school. And then *Purple Rain* came out and everyone was checking that out and I remember the movie.

Taylor: Right. That was huge.

Ellman: And seeing him play that Telecaster and the whole thing. It wasn't like I wanted to be Prince, but playing guitar seemed cool. And then, as soon as I started playing it, I was like 'this is cool' because I was playing along to the records at home and trying to pick up stuff. I was never trying to be a singer-songwriter person.

I was trying to reproduce the dynamic in the classic rock band. There is the guitar player and then there's the singer, like Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix of course. So I was first brought into the guitar through that rock stuff. I started taking lessons.

My very first guitar lesson was before I moved to California when I was 5, but it didn't take. I had a nylon string guitar and the guy was trying to get me to play *Yankee Doodle*. I didn't practice and I wasn't into it for whatever reason. It just didn't take.

The second time I got a new guitar and I got into it. There was a teacher named Jon Mulvey who was more of a rock player. He had all the modes on the guitar. He would show me Dorian mode, Mixolydian, and all these things and that was when I first started learning theory on the guitar. I took to it pretty quickly. I was like, "Oh this cool." Not so much understanding about music theory...

Taylor: Getting around the instrument?

Ellman: Right! And being able to make cool sounds. He had a four-track cassette thing and he would record chords and then I would take it home and play over it and stuff like that. And that's how we started talking about jazz. He started asking me, "Do you have any jazz music?"

I told him that my mom has all this stuff, so I started pulling out *A Love Supreme* and those sort of things. Finally, I found *Bitches Brew* which had John McLaughlin on it. When I heard him playing, I was like, "Wow, what's this?" So I started combing through the records and finding things with jazz guitar and then I started bringing those things to my teacher and asking him what's going on here.

He could tell me what was happening. He wasn't really a jazz player, but he knew enough to say "This one is a blues, this one has chords like this." So then, I got into high school and I had been studying a couple years with this guy...

Taylor: Were you playing with any other people at that time?

Ellman: Not yet. I just played along to records. Wait, that's not true. There was a friend in 6th grade who played drums and he and I would just bash freely (laughter).

Taylor: Nice.

Ellman: This was before I even started taking lessons.

Taylor: There has to be some tapes of that somewhere.

Ellman: We had tapes. I wish I could find them. And we just played free. I had another friend in middle school who was drummer and he and I started playing rock songs together. This is all coming together, the lesson I took. I started

getting into jazz and then when I finally got into high school, I met another guitar player and he introduced me to all of his friends who were older musicians. He was a year older than me. And the way I met him was in wood shop class actually. I don't know if they have that anymore.

Taylor Oh yeah, in some places...

Ellman: And he literally said "Does anyone know how to make a guitar? Do you want to make a guitar in wood shop?" I don't know, but I know what it looks like. And that's how we met. He had all this other music for me to listen to like fusion stuff, Jean Luc Ponty and stuff like that, with Alan Holsworth. So I was like, "Alan Holsworth, who's this?" He had some real crazy stuff, he also had some Chick Corea.

He had a friend that played bebop guitar and I started taking lessons with him, this guy Sanford Schwartzbah. I only took a few lessons, but he was the one to show me a chord with a flat 9 and a sharp 9 as a augmented chord and I said, "Oh wow!" and he was turning me on to all kinds of stuff. He was the one to turn me on to Joe Pass and Kevin Eubanks and all these different jazz guitarists. He was interested in a wide range of music.

That's when I really learned how to dig through the jazz section and check out stuff. Pat Martino, you know the heavy cats. So I started getting into all that stuff. I would get together with him and his brother, who played drums, and we played together.

Then, I had another friend who was starting to play all the rock tunes together at his house. I'd steal a little pot from my mom and then go over there

and we'd play the Police and Led Zeppelin and all that stuff.

Taylor: (laughter).

Ellman: Jimi Hendrix songs... So I was playing both. I was playing jazz and rock guitar and on the West coast, it seemed like not a big deal to be interested in everything. Maybe it was just being young. Even when I started playing professionally going through college and all of that it, it seemed like playing in different music scenes was just what you did.

Taylor: It seemed natural.

Ellman: You had to because the scene wasn't big enough. No one thing was going to be enough for you to survive so I played in a Reggae band, I played bebop gigs at restaurants and private parties, I would play my own music. I was in a hip-hop band called Midnight Voices and there was all this different stuff. People would say, "Oh you play guitar." They wouldn't ask what kind of music I played.

Taylor: It sounds like the exact opposite of New York.

Ellman: Totally. So after high school, my friend Stanford went on to Sonoma State, which was why I went there because he said there was a guitar teacher named Randy Vincent who he thought I should study with. I thought about going to Berklee, but I was pretty much on my own. My mom didn't go to college. She's very smart, but she just wasn't hip to scholarships and financial aid. She just said that we would figure it out, whatever I wanted to do, but it was kind of up to me.

When I saw the prices of Berklee and all of that, I was like I don't think

that is going to work. And I don't know if my sight reading was good enough at that time where I would have gotten a scholarship. Maybe I could have done something, but being in the state of California, tuition cost almost nothing. I paid \$2,000 a year and this guy Randy Vincent was amazing. He knew everything about guitar. You had to sort of...

Taylor: Dig for it.

Ellman: He would sit there and have his guitar, and you'd be like "Hey, how are you doing? So, okay, how do people make chord solos on 'Body and Soul?'" He'd say, "Do this." All of a sudden, he would just play and there it was. It was incredible. It was like an encyclopedia of knowledge.

Studying with him was really a breakthrough because he had all of these stretchy voicings and he was really into stuff with minor 2nd runs. Maybe my introduction to dissonance on the guitar came through him. He was a really good straight ahead player, but he had a nice modern flare and that was really cool. And there was a guy named Mel Graves who ran the department and he was into Art Lang and Danny Zietlin and their sort of other arty jazz guys. And, again, he was a very good bebop player, but he was super open-minded.

The way these guys ran the department was very cool. They'd ask you "What are you interested in?" They had their curriculum of stuff that you had to learn as well. My favorite classes were the ear training, jazz composition and the jazz theory classes. Mr. Graves taught the jazz composition class and in my very first jazz composition class with him, he played this Gil Evans record, *The Individualism of Gil Evans*. Do you know that one?

Taylor: Sure.

Ellman: He put on the song *Barbara* and it starts out kind of spooky. It starts out with the flutes and the woodwinds going (sings part).

Taylor: Oh yeah.

Ellman: So we are in a room with no windows and he turns the lights off and puts that on. The melody comes in and then Wayne comes in with this solo that is unbelievable. I was just sitting there wondering what was happening (laughter). It was great. It was so great. I feel so fortunate to have gone through that program. We didn't have all of the hot shot players, but Benny Green had gone there. There had been some good players who came through, but good players are going to be good players no matter where they go to school. There were enough good musicians there that we had a really good time playing.

Taylor: It seems like you had some great teachers.

Ellman: Well that's the thing. It was so open. They would definitely let you know if they thought you weren't making the changes. Mr. Graves would put his finger in his ear and say, "You're playing *Satin Doll*. That's not happening." I remember when I got this new guitar, this George Benson model Albenz. I plugged it straight into the Polytone. I was trying to get a sound out of it, but it didn't sound that good because it was really bright and I didn't really know how to work the thing, and he was like, "Wow, it sounds like a ukulele. What are you doing?" But he was one of those tough love kind of guys and I got a lot out of it.

But I think many years later, I can always look back at that and say wow it was so great to be around these guys who were so interested in helping you

become an artist. They just wanted you to be yourself and figure out what you want to do with your life because they know how ridiculous it is to say 'I'm going to get a degree and then play jazz for a living.' Even twenty years ago, it was ridiculous to say that. It's even more ridiculous now to say that. But at that time they were like the best you can do is just to learn how to do whatever it is you want to do and be yourself and try and make some music that makes you happy. That is literally what I took away from my education there, other than the technical stuff. That did help, like learning how to make parts and transposing things. All of that stuff is useful.

Taylor: At that same time you were in school, were you performing?

Ellman: Oh yeah. Through that time there was a lot of different stuff. Like all of the typical stuff from the kids you meet at school.

Taylor: We're you doing sessions?

Ellman: Yeah, you know there was a bass player that's pretty good who's an older guy who played with the saxophone player who I went to school with. We would go over to his house. He would have him and this other guy who played trumpet, probably in his mid sixties who didn't even know how to read music but played great and knew all the tunes. They'd be like, "So, what tunes do you know?"

They were really just open and interested and I think at the point, you start and show some musicianship so it wasn't like a drag for them. But they were definitely helping you out. I was just learning from local people who were playing all of the jobbing kind of gigs around town. But you know in California

those gigs are pleasurable, you're playing in a wine bar in Saratoga. You drive up, the weather is perfect and you're drinking really good wine. You're playing straight ahead and enjoying it. Even playing weddings and stuff like that, everybody is just laid back. It just didn't have the feeling of work the way a lot of those gigs here feel like. At least that's my memory of it. It was probably the age I was at the time and everything.

Taylor: Did you go to Yoshi's a lot?

Ellman: Yeah, right about my last year of school, I had a friend from high school who was a good jazz pianist. He moved to New Orleans for awhile and came back reborn as a rapper. He wanted to start a rap band and he was a really good musician. We did these improv/guitar piano things and they were pretty cool. We started this band called Real Basement Swing. There was drummer named Brad Hargreaves who ended up being Vijay Iyer's first drummer.

Taylor: He's on your first record too, right?

Ellman: Exactly. He was in that band and he was going to UC Berkeley and Vijay was also going to UC Berkeley, so I met Brad through Vijay I suppose. Is that right? No, I met Brad first. I met Vijay through Brad. But Brad and I became roommates. Basically, my friend Wyatt moved to Oakland and he wanted us all to live together and have this band.

So, we went and we found this house for rent and we had a studio in the basement, some low grade recording stuff. We would kind of experiment down there. But that became the most important thing because we had that space and Brad and I started playing together a lot. That was one and a half

blocks away from the old Yoshi's.

Taylor: Wow.

Ellman: It was on Claremont. It was a smaller place. So we would go down there all the time. They knew us there and they'd let us in. Then we had some personnel changes because actually it was a three bedroom house and we converted the living room into another space because we had a living room and a dining room. So we had a lot of other roommates, too. New Basement Swing did some gigs but it turned out that Wyatt had a drug problem. And one day he just disappeared when it was his turn to pay rent. We gave him the money and he just vanished.

I had to call his Mom and hear her cry on the phone when I told her that he took all the money. I asked her if she could help us out and she did. Anyway, things changed, but Brad and I stayed and we kept playing. We started having a lot of sessions like every week with a lot of different people coming over.

Then we'd go to Yoshi's and people would come over after the shows. Eventually the publicist for Yoshi moved in. He was a little bit older.

Taylor: Did you got the hook up then?

Ellman: Yeah, I saw everyone that came through, whether it was Joe Henderson, Betty Carter, Steve Coleman... The first time I heard Threadgill play was at Yoshi's.

Taylor: I want to make sure I understand the timeline.

Ellman: I moved into that house during my last year of college, the beginning of my last year at Sonoma State. I moved to Oakland and drove all the way up to

Sonoma to go to school. I had a girlfriend up there, so I would stay at her place sometimes and then I would come back down. This was 1993.

I never moved up to Sonoma when I went to school. I would always stay closer to the city because I had been playing gigs and stuff like that. I didn't want to live up there. So my friend Greg, who I met in wood shop playing guitar, and I stayed really tight. He now owns a studio in Sonoma. He and I were roommates until we moved into that house in Oakland. He bought an 8-track and I had my Yamaha DX7 and a Quadraverb and we would make recordings and we made some funny stuff.

He was into a little more poppy music, but interesting stuff like Dada. Anyway, he goes to Burning Man. He's on that scene. We had a great time in his apartment and we had a lot friends come through. I was listening to a lot of music and my friend Chris, who I went to high school with, was a bass player. He's now in L. A in Janes Addiction. He's done as well as you can possibly do in music in terms of making money and that kind of scene.

Taylor: Sure.

Ellman: He's one of the top ten studio bass players in L.A. He's done movie soundtracks.

Taylor: What's his name again?

Ellman: Chris Cheney. If you watch *Entourage* or any of those shows and the bass comes in, that's him. He has some great stories about doing film scores with John Williams with 77 musicians and all these guys. He says that the worst thing is you have to do is sight read this stuff. You have to play and get it down

and there's all this money being spent and if you mess up and no one hears it you have to raise your hand and say, "I messed up bar 72 (laughter)." He has some good stories about that. So, Chris went to Berkeley and he turned me on to Steve Coleman and the 5 Elements. So that started influencing my music.

Taylor: That whole scene developed on the West Coast, didn't it?

Ellman: Not exactly. That happened in New York. His whole M-Base thing happened here also Greg Osby and that scene. The thing is that Steve came out when I was living in Oakland and played at Yoshi's. I remember Vijay who I had met through Brad and we started going to the shows. There was this saxophone player named D'Armous Boone. We were the people who were there every single night when Steve came through. We all started talking. I guess Vijay had known who he was because he was also at UC Berkeley. So D'Armous, Vijay, and I started hanging out. This was 1994 maybe.

So then, we talked to Steve. David Gilmore was in that band. I talked to Dave, just asking questions. I started looking at what Steve was doing and he had done that *Extensions* record with Dave Holland, Marvin Smitty Smith and Kevin Eubanks. When I heard that record and heard them live, I knew I wanted to be a musician. These guys were playing modern music. They were improvising, they're playing really interesting, complicated stuff. It's modern sounding stuff, but it's grounded and it has its own thing.

It had everything that I thought was good about modern jazz in the moment. And also, more specifically, because I didn't understand what *Inner Urge*, *Take the A Train*, and all these tunes that I was learning and playing at gigs

and how that related to my future as a musician.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: I wasn't able to put that together because I knew that that wasn't my music. It was my music in terms of how I was learning to play my instrument and it was music I loved to listen to. I never get tired of listening to Joe Henderson. I knew that that was Joe Henderson's music, but what was going to happen with me? What am I going to do?

I didn't know who the people were who I could see myself being with or being like. What was the example? That was the one thing I didn't get in college, the example of who I could be after school professionally.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: Even though I had records of these people, when I saw them live, like when I saw Threadgill play, too, I was like, "Okay, this is music of now." Vijay was already ahead of me with that. So we started playing our own music. And Vijay and I were in each other's bands and in other people's bands, too. That was when we were playing a lot of odd time signatures and trying to figure out how to improvise over this music. We spent a lot of time practicing.

Taylor: Was Steve doing workshops at this time?

Ellman: Not yet. What happened was that Steve came back a year later, probably 1995, after I was done with college. I was really just writing music and playing all these different type of gigs. I was doing theatre stuff. I was in the Hip-Hop band, Midnight Voices. Vijay ended up being in that, too. We did his records. We did my records and then I was playing a lot of gigs around town.

There was an R & B singer named Legacy who is doing really well now. She was Grammy nominated a couple years ago, but she had a band called Anebada that I played in. I met her through D'Armous, the saxophone player I mentioned. So, I'm playing in an R&B band and I'm playing creative free stuff. I'm playing really composed music, I'm playing straight ahead, and it all seemed natural.

Nobody said, "Oh you just do this or just do that." Wherever I needed to go, I would go. But then Steve came back and got a grant to do a residency. There was a non-profit organization called the Upper Room. One of the rappers in Midnight Voices' father ran this place. It was supposed to be a community place where you could do music, poetry and all this stuff.

I don't know the specifics of Steve's grant, but he was doing a workshop there. So, he had rented a house for a month in Oakland, doing these workshops at the Upper Room and just having jam sessions. People would come in and basically just learn from what he and his band were doing. Rappers would come in and sit in on his music. So Vijay and I went down and played.

We had a gig with D'Armous at Yoshi's and Steve came down and checked it out. Elliot Kavee wasn't playing in D'Armous' band, but Elliot also went to Sonoma State.

Taylor: Oh, I didn't know that.

Ellman: Actually, he loves to tell the story. When I first started going to school up there, he was playing some gig in town and I was hanging out and I went and heard the gig. It might have been this band called Frame with the

saxophonist Eric Crystal. I remember hearing Elliot and he was so different than everyone else.

I remember walking up to him and saying, "Man. I want to play music with you." And he loves telling that story because we had never actually played together until several years after that. So Steve came to that gig and then he invited D'Armous, me and Vijay to play with him. He was going to do a gig at Yoshi's and he had a band called the Mystic Rhythm Society which was a bigger thing.

So he added us to the Five Elements band and we played at Yoshi's. After that, we started going to his Upper Room stuff and it was cool because he would do this thing where he would invite us up to sit in. A lot of times, though, what would happen was that we would come and sit in and then slowly the Five Elements band would leave the stage and it would just be us playing and they'd be hanging out in the back.

Steve was very encouraging. I was pretty green at that time. I took a lesson with him and spent a day with him. He was very encouraging telling me that I should try and go to New York. Obviously, there was a lot of stuff that I needed to get together and he was not shy about telling me that, but he was encouraging in telling me that there was more I might want to be doing. Vijay ended up touring with him a bit after that. He did a couple records and stuff, but that was an important time because that was the first time I got to spend any intimate time with someone who I considered to be a jazz star and who was also making the kind of music that was my kind of music.

So I thought, “This is cool. Maybe I need to do that.” And I had thought about coming to New York as I was from there originally. So a couple years later in 1997, I decided it was time to go back. My girlfriend and I came out. So coming here, I shared a moving truck with Vijay.

Taylor: So you guys came out together?

Ellman: We came out together. Yeah, it was him and his wife and me and Kate. I don’t know if they were married, yet so it might have been him and his girlfriend.

Taylor: So when you came out here, that must have been terrifying. Did you have a gig lined up out here?

Ellman: No, that was the thing. I called my Dad and told him I wanted to come out because he was living in New Jersey and he asked me what I was going to do. He had stopped playing music for a while and had become a financial planner and his conservative advice was to pay off my debts and save \$10,000 dollars. He told me that it was very expensive out here and that it’s going to be rough, so I should come out as light as I can. I agreed and hung up the phone and told myself that that’s not going to happen (laughter). I’m coming out. You know what I mean? That’s not going to happen. But the thing is, it was okay. It didn’t matter.

Taylor: Because you knew other people out there?

Ellman: Well, my grandmother lived uptown in Harlem. She didn’t have a big place. I didn’t stay with family, but knowing my grandmother was there and that my Dad was in Montclair, Kate and I talked about it and said that the worst thing that could happen is that we would have to crash at my Dad’s place until we

could figure something out.

I had one friend who was living in Manhattan. We had set a move date, but I came out a month before that and crashed at her place and started looking around for stuff. I tried to figure out how to get work, so I started temping doing data entry and stuff like that. I had all kinds of different temp jobs and my friend Monica, as it turns out, had a job at Capital Records in the classics and jazz department. She was in what you call “special markets.”

Special markets was similar to Starbucks putting out a compilation CD. She was an assistant to someone. But not to long after I moved here, she decided that she wanted to move back to California about 6 months to a year after being here (end of 1997 or early 1998).

The jazz department of Capital Records is Blue Note Records. Even though she wasn’t technically working for Blue Note Records, she was right there on the floor above. I had gone to visit her there and I said, “Wow, this is cool. Can you get me a job here?” She was leaving, so I said, “Can you get me an interview for your job?” I had met her boss. And she said, “Yeah, it would be convenient for them.” And I got the job.

Taylor: Nice!

Ellman: And then very shortly after that, there was a guy in the marketing department at Blue Note, an assistant who ended up losing his job. They offered me his job. Then, I was an assistant in the marketing department at Blue Note. Getting that job was really important because all of a sudden, I was meeting everyone in the jazz scene in New York. I was working on records from

the label side where I learned the business. I was working with Cassandra Wilson, Joe Lovano and Greg Osby. I had met Greg Osby in California because he came through and did a show once and Vijay and I opened up for him as a duo. Jason Moran was with him and so we met Jason and Greg.

Taylor: Nice.

Ellman: So when I came out, Greg was one person that I knew in town even though he had been living in Pennsylvania. He had a gig at the Knitting Factory and I went down. I had seen him around the office so I was like, "Hey, what's up?" It was kind of trippy that I was meeting all the writers and all of the radio people. I could get free tickets to shows and was getting hooked up. And where I was sitting, too, was right outside the A & R guy's office. His name was Brian Bachus. I don't know if you have ever met Brian, but he knows everybody.

Taylor: I haven't.

Ellman: I was also playing and I was trying to get my shit together. Vijay and I were playing a little bit and I started putting together a trio. I had a regular gig on Tuesday nights. I think that started in 1999 and I did that for a couple years.

Taylor: Where was that?

Ellman: It was a place called the Ciel Rouge. It was a little bar on 7th Ave between 21st and 22nd Street and it wasn't known for music, but it was this really cool, dark bordello kind of vibe. Red everything and red table cloths and lights, but it had this little stage and we played trio there every Tuesday Night. It just became a little scene amongst my friends. I was just playing my music, maybe a drum solo over a vamp in 11 and people would be making out in the back.

Taylor: (laughter)

Ellman: It was this strange combination. I know we scared some people away who didn't know what was up because it was the kind of place you'd take a date. But people started coming and hanging and sitting in. One particular night, James Hurt, Vijay and Dred Scott, this piano player, came. Now, there no piano in this place, so if a piano player wanted to sit in, he normally would show up with a melodica. Well, it just so happened that on this night, all three of those guys showed up with a melodicas.

Taylor: That's crazy (laughter).

Ellman: So, we had this one tune of dueling melodicas, just different stuff. Jason Moran came through because I started playing with Greg at that time. Greg had a gig at the Knitting Factory and I came down and he invited me to sit in. I ended up playing the whole second set and then I started playing in his band on and off.

Taylor: Nice.

Ellman: One of the first gigs I did with him was in Europe with Oliver Lake and Bob Stewart on tuba, so through that, you start meeting everybody by being here in New York. The A & R guy at Blue Note really liked my playing and he would come down to my gigs every Tuesday. He also just liked to hang and he started helping me out. One particular night when we were sharing a cab back to Brooklyn, he said, "Who else do you want to play with? What else do you want to do?" And he kind of stumped me.

That's a good question because of my interests weren't really

obvious. The one name that came to my head was Threadgill. So I said, “Well, you know, the one musician that I really love is Henry Threadgill. He said that he knew Henry, so he takes out his phone and starts dialing Henry’s number.

Taylor: No way (laughter)!

Ellman: He calls Henry and says “Henry, how are you doing man? What’s happening? This really great guitar player and friend of mine wants to play with you. You should check him out. He’s really happening.” Next week, Henry comes to my gig at the Ciel Rouge to come hear me play because that’s the kind of guy he is. He goes out to hear music. He goes out to shows.

He knows Brian, so he comes down. A month later, he gives me the gig. That’s when Zooid started. Originally, he was going to use a pipa player in Zooid. The original version of the band was going to be Tony Cedras playing harmonium and accordion, Dafnis Prieto on drums, Wu Man on pipa, and Jose Davila on tuba.

Taylor: Wow.

Ellman: That was going to be the original band, but she couldn’t make it. It was right at the right time because he had just heard me, so asked if I could play acoustic guitar. I said, “Oh yeah, great.”

Taylor: That’s amazing.

Ellman: So, that is how I met Henry, through Brian.

Taylor: So, a month after he went to hear you, he called you?

Ellman: Yeah. So he called me and said, “Yeah, I have this gig. Do you want to try?” I said yes, so I went to the rehearsal and he hands out the music.

Taylor: What was that like?

Ellman: Well, it was interesting, I learned how to play by ear. It wasn't until I came to New York that my sight reading got better. I think he gave me the charts before the rehearsal, just the guitar part. But he writes everything sort of like chamber music. All the parts add up to a harmony.

So, if you're playing through the harmony, you might be playing only one or two notes. You're not playing chord symbols. You're playing these cells. If you're not playing the melody, it might seem even more abstract, so without hearing the other parts, I'm playing this thing (sings abstract part). I'm like, "What the hell is this?" I'm trying to figure out how to play it.

So, we show up to rehearsal and as soon as we start playing through it, I was like, "Oh man, wow" because I'm hearing all the parts. All of a sudden, I can feel how I lock with the tuba and cello. Oh, I guess that was before the cello. It was Tony. The first person was Tarik Tony and tuba. But the way everything fit together made perfect sense.

As soon as we read through the first piece, I was like, "okay, I get it now." Everything is an interlocking rhythm, but it's so strong. It just pulls you in. So then I thought that this was going to be great. So then we started doing it, but what was really hard was improvising on the stuff. Forget about jazz vocabulary because if you play any type of cliché over, it doesn't fit because the harmony isn't based on that kind of material.

The harmonic motion is much more like modern classical music. Most jazz phrases are designed to talk you through II, V, I jazz harmony. They land on

the third or the fifth of whatever so a lot of these jazz cliché lines are designed that way. They do that. But in his music, you're not going to land anywhere.

So, what you really have to do is focus on the chord tones that are in his harmony and his intervallic system and you have to really work with that. You have to intellectually stay focused on that and develop a new sound in your ear.

Taylor: That sounds like a long process.

Ellman: It's a very long process. I remember I had a gig with Josh Roseman. I played with him for a few years. There was a gig he had at CBGB's gallery.

Taylor: I remember that place (laughter).

Ellman: So we had a gig there and he was like, "Hey man, what are you doing?" And this was typical of Josh to say, "Do you have a gig on Sunday?" on Thursday when we were playing a gig in Vermont or something. "Are you free this Sunday? Do you want to do a gig with me, Ari Hoenig and Oliver Lake? It's just quartet. There's no bass." I was like, "Alright, that sounds cool" thinking the gig is this Sunday and you don't have the band sorted out yet. Wow (laughter).

So, I show up down there and guitarist Ben Monder is set up ready to play. So Josh and I share a car down there together and we show up and Ben sees me and I see Ben and Josh is like, "you guys both should play (laughter)," which ended up being great. It was really fun. But, I remember talking to Ben because I had been playing with Henry and we were at the bar having a beer and I remember saying this is the hardest gig I've ever had. And he was like, "What's hard about it?" I told him that it's the improvisation part and you have to

let go of all of whatever you bring to it.

Taylor: You have to let it go.

Ellman: Yes, in terms of vocabulary. In terms of musicianship, you need to really rely on your ear and your rhythmic sense and your ability to digest his theory to make it sound right. If you try and work with the information he gives you, you are going to get better results. It took me a long time to develop the sound to where now I can feel like I can improvise in the way you want to improvise which is by ear.

I play through the harmony and I know how to navigate his harmonic stuff. I feel like now I have a certain vocabulary that's only really useful and based on his information. I can play a certain way in his band and I try to bring it to other situations. I really do and sometimes I can, but it's taken me a long time. It probably took me 4 or 5 years before I started feeling comfortable.

Taylor: There are a couple of tunes on your third record where I really hear Threadgill's influence.

Ellman: Yeah, definitely. In terms of my music, that's the first record that really had that stuff in it. But, even with Henry's music, I think it took me a few years before I would really feel like I could consistently go out and play a good solo in Zooid. I think for other people it was fine, even for the advanced musicians who come to the show. They don't know what's happening and so it's sort of like you just have to sort of accept the ride and just let the music take you where it needs to go. Don't sit there trying to figure it out. I see people sitting there trying to count it out.

Taylor: No, no, that doesn't work.

Ellman: The thing is, it's all there and it's very specific. There's not much free improvisation that happens in Henry's music although there are sections where that does happen. The reason it is so hard for people to follow is because the forms are very complicated.

Taylor: Right, and what I hear is that everybody's downbeat is not the same.

Ellman: Well, that's if you're listening to what the drums are playing because the drummer is the one person who might have different downbeats. Usually all of us have the same structure. Henry's music is always written in phrases. Nothing is in a time signature. I mean every bar has a time signature, but it might be a bar of 9, a bar of 4, a bar of 6, a bar of 3, and that's because that's how the phrases are written. So when you're reading through it, you're reading like that.

Taylor: You're reading through the phrases?

Ellman: You're reading through the phrases. It's just like jazz. We read through the phrases and then we'll solo over that. The harmony is there, but he uses so many techniques in terms of improvisation and how the form works. So many techniques he takes from classical music. And I mean like modern composers, so he'll hand you a piece of paper and there's the A the B and the C.

Then we'll rehearse it and he'll say lets just repeat it. It's really tricky down there at C. Then he might say I want to hear how the harmony C and let's just take those first three bars and loop them. So we'll just loop that section and we all have these syncopated things that are happening and we'll just loop it until it's iron tight.

Then he'll say, "Now, you lay out for the first couple of times and just have the tuba and the bass play their parts or it might be just tuba, bass and drums."

Then he will say, "Okay, that's going to be the intro. The first three bars of C, let's just loop that with the bass and the tuba and we'll do that three times. Then we will go up to A and play the theme at A. So you're like, "okay." But you don't ever want to write it down because...

Taylor: He might change it?

Ellman: He might change his mind. So whenever anyone new would come to a rehearsal, I would start laughing because they'd be taking notes.

Taylor: (laughter)

Ellman: And then he'd be like, "no, no, no, don't do that, don't do that." He'd change it up.

Taylor: (laughter)

Ellman: The thing is, you have to start memorizing.

Taylor: You have to know all the parts.

Ellman: You have to really know the forms. The first 3 bars of C are just the bass, the tuba, and the drums 3 times. Then we go to A and play the melody and then we go to solo over A,

Taylor: When he writes the phrases, are there time signatures?

Ellman: Yeah, let me see what music I can find. I don't know if I have a score of anything in this book. This is what we are rehearsing right now. Oh yeah, here's something. So check this out, *Blackbird*. So when Henry's composing, he writes on the piano. This is what he's writing when he's writing (hands me the score).

He doesn't start off with it looking like this. He probably first writes in a sketch book. He sits at the piano and he'll be playing the chords, which he doesn't have written on here. Oh wait, he does.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: He's just writing the phrases out as he hears them (sings melody). So this is on the bass flute. As the phrases are being written, he's deciding these breath marks are the end of the phrase. But, he's deciding this is what time signature it is because of the way it is phrased. He's putting that all down. So that's *Blackbird*. He writes it like chamber music as you can see. Right?

Taylor: Yeah.

Ellman: All the parts are there.

Taylor: So, you can always see how your parts are relating to the others?

Ellman: He doesn't hand it out, but if you ask him for the full score, he'll give it to you. This is actually what he gives you (pulls out guitar chart), so that's my part for that piece. So when you first get your piece, you're looking at this and this is what I'm playing (sings part). It's all funky, grooving, syncopated shit. As you can see, the time signatures are there.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: But like I said earlier, they'll be a different form. When he hands you this, it doesn't tell you what the form is. It's just telling you what the piece is.

Taylor: He'll switch things around.

Ellman: Absolutely. Look when you see these arrows and things. Like my solo section is A backwards because that arrow is going that way. And then B and

then C forward. That's my solo section.

Taylor: Wow, that's crazy.

Ellman: And then these are the chords and the numbers underneath the chords are beats for how long that chord is going to last. Very often in these pieces, he refers to a long meter which is basically expansion. What it means is that this is a bar of 4/4 but these add up to eight because when the harmony is happening, he wants the harmony to be twice as long. That happens in a lot of the pieces.

The rhythm of the written part will be doubled when you're soloing so you have a chance to really hear the harmony move. Not always, sometimes it doesn't do that.

Taylor: If I were to look at a drum part, would it be lined up with this part?

Ellman: The thing with the drums is that it's like that on every piece. This is a slower piece so he may not have different time signatures for the drums, but on other pieces, he does.

Handwritten musical score for a piece featuring Flute, Guitar, Oud, Bass Trombone, Cello, Drums, and Trombones. The score is written in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as chords, notes, and rests. Above the staff, there are handwritten numbers in parentheses: (2 2 3 4 5 7), (1-2 3 4 5 6 7), (1-2 3 4 5 6 7), and (1-2 3 4 5 6). The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and there are some handwritten annotations like 'Poco' and 'Ad lib'.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: I don't have his parts and they're not always indicated on the score.

Taylor: When I listen to *Zooid*, I'm always amazed at how fluid everything sounds. You can't really count it. That's counter productive.

Ellman: The thing is that if you had the score in front of you and you knew how to read it, you could follow it that way, but if you went to the symphony to hear Elliot Carter, you would be sitting there trying to count the measures.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: You know what I mean? People don't expect that when they go to a concert like that, but they expect that sometimes at a jazz concert. With Henry's music, that's okay if you don't know what to expect, but your doing yourself a dis-service if your really trying to analyze it to much because it's just too difficult.

The form is too difficult to analyze. Ethan Iverson did an interview with Henry not too long ago and he was saying that he was trying to transcribe *Polymorph* and he said he had to give up. You can't do it because there is so much happening. The written material happen as it's written, but there are so many other things that happen besides just the notes, the way that the time is felt, the texture. Are you plucking? Are you playing pianissimo? Are you trilling? Are you playing up high? Did you take it up an octave? There are all these things you can do because we rehearse so much and because Henry really wants the band to be like a band.

Taylor: And have its own language?

Ellman: And have its own language. We work on that. So, we'll rehearse one bar

of music and say what happens if you do this? What happens if the tuba and the bass switch parts? We work on this stuff. I think there are a lot of people now writing interesting music and trying to get stuff to happen with it, but they can't achieve their goals because they can't get enough rehearsal time.

Taylor: Yes. I agree.

Ellman: What Henry's done is that he's found people who are willing to put in the time. It's not that we don't have complicated lives and children and we're super busy because we are. But you can find the time. You just do it because you believe as Marcus Rojos. We just did a record together with this guy Jason Robinson and he wanted to talk about Henry because Marcus was in Very Very Circus.

He was saying you just have to believe in what Henry's doing in order to make it work. It's a made up world. I don't think it's really make believe. I think because with Zooid, he took another leap theoretically in what his personal compositional discoveries are and I think they have gone up a notch.

Taylor: Can we stay with that for a second?

Ellman: Yeah

Taylor: How did Henry's music evolve between *Up Popped Two Lips* and *This Brings Us To*?

Ellman: That's a pretty simple answer. He has this intervallic system based on the harmony. This is a device that he has created for himself just like a lot of other musicians in the A.A.C.M have done. I don't know if you've played Wadada's music, but he has his visual graphic scores.

I remember playing with him and doing these things and then he pulled out a graphic score that was in color. Everything before was black and white. And then I realized they were all in color, but he didn't want to deal with the color because some people hadn't played it yet. That's another level.

What a lot of these guys have been very successful at doing is creating something that is unique to their own music, like a certain type of language to get musicians to play in a certain way that they're not playing in other situations. They try and find a way to get the group to do something, to have a control over the result of the music without it being a cliché or something that someone else is doing and making the musicians rely on some other resources and other parts of their musical abilities.

They try and get musicians to use other parts of their brain besides just chords and scales and stuff like that. And also with modern composers, what separates Bartok from Stravinsky from Schoenberg? What's the difference? There are differences there. There are different devices that they use.

Henry's device in Zooid has been the development of this interval system. You have three notes in a chord. He then looks at all the intervals that are related between those notes and creates a mode of numbers. There might be a D an Eb above that and then an F. The D to the Eb is a minor 9th, we'll call it a minor 2nd, between the Eb and the F is a major 2nd. There is a minor 2nd and then a major 2nd. Then, there is the D to the F, right?

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: So then he'll say what happens if I take the F and then go up...

Taylor: An octave?

Ellman: No, not an octave, but what if I reverse those notes? What if I just switch the F and the Eb or what if I drop down? There's a 3rd between the D and the F, so let me take the D and go down a 3rd instead of up a 3rd. What note do I get? What he does by doing that is he takes the intervals that are present and flips the notes around so he gets all the different chords by moving those notes by those intervals. So if you go down a major 3rd from D and if you go up a minor 3rd, you get F. If you go down a minor 3rd, you get B. So then you have a B on the bottom and then Eb and F.

So then he'll say well what if I go up a major 2nd from B? Well, then, I get a C, and he'll start making all these different chords using those intervals and then you have this family of chords that are related because of the intervals from the first one.

Taylor: That are similar to one another?

Ellman: Right. You get 6 different chords by doing that. Somehow it works out that way. And then he decides which of those chords he wants to use in that particular phrase. And those are all in that family of intervals. There might be only one bar that uses those chords or it might be a few bars that uses those chords, and then that interval set will be in brackets like this. Right?

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: You see the number here. This is a good example. These are three of the chords that come out of that family and there are the intervals that you get.

Taylor: So, when you're improvising, you can use the intervals that go with these

three chords?

Ellman: Right. Basically, there are the chords. I'm playing a rhythm part, so I'm playing part of the chord. Here is my first note, it's a B. I usually play the upper part of these chords, Bb G Eb (sings part). Now, it's a melody, but it's a rhythmic melody that goes below the melody he's playing. So I'm always playing the notes in these chords. So that's how I decide my melody. That's my strong melodic note for that chord. So when I'm soloing, I can make sure I am hitting the G and the Bb here. But then these are the intervals that are present in these chords and they all share this interval relationship, so I try and make melodies with these intervals.

Taylor: I see.

Ellman: And, I try not to play the intervals that are not there, at least that's the way you practice it. When I am playing by ear I might. There's no 6's in this chord, there's no major or minor 6th. If I happen to play one, it's ok but it's in the context of this (points to measure). You know what I mean?

Taylor: I got it.

Ellman: These are really important when you are playing accompaniment to someone else's solo. Because then what happens is, for example, in this piece, the trombone has a solo here. And again it's like the trombone plays here and it just plays to here and then it goes back. That's the trombone solo, but it's in what he calls long meter so instead of it just being a bar of 4/4, it's 2, 4, 2. That's 8 beats. So the note that I'm playing is Bb. It could be Bb anywhere, but when I go to the next chord Bb to G it has to be in the movement that is one of these.

Taylor: I'm confused. Can you say that again?

Ellman: From Bb to G, I can either go Bb up to a G or I can go Bb down to a G.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: So if I go Bb, Ab...Well, if I go down to G from a Bb, that's a minor 3rd down. Both 3's are there so that's a legal motion because the 3 is there. If I need to go down a minor 3rd, that's okay. If there wasn't a minor 3rd there, that wouldn't be cool. That has to do with the way the voice leading is moving on the keyboard.

Taylor: I got it.

Ellman: So when you're playing behind someone else's solo, it's important to try and do that. Sometimes in the heat of the moment, you don't. Everything is happening and you go up. It doesn't spoil anything. But as far as Henry is concerned, he really wants you to play that properly. Then, as we all play the chord together, we are moving the way he wants us to move.

Taylor: Was that process used for the first Zoid record?

Ellman: No. He had started working with it, but we weren't playing that on the first record.

Taylor: Okay.

Ellman: The tunes were much simpler. It still had his signature rhythm and quality to his melodies and everything and the chords would look like the three note chord cells, but he wasn't suggesting the number system.

Taylor: Oh, okay. When did that develop?

Ellman: That came later. He had started working on it at that point, but not really with us. We recorded that record pretty soon after we started the band. So, I think he wanted to give us time and to give himself time because he had to learn how to play it, too (laughter). I think that we all had to develop that and that became a part of the ritual, working on that.

Taylor: Then there was that recording that only came out on vinyl. I'm still trying to get a hold of that.

Ellman: I don't know if you ever will (laughter). That was a specific thing. That was a project written for. You know Henry has that instrument called the Hubkaphone.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: That kind of sounds like a Gamelan percussion instrument. That's how I would describe it. It's hub caps. Have you seen it?

Taylor: I haven't seen it.

Ellman: It's great. It's a big frame with all these hub caps hanging kind of like a big steel pan kit. And if you hit them in different places, they make different sounds. So he just writes pieces for it. That was the only time that we used it in this band. And what he did was we had an installation performance at Engine 27 which I don't know if that space exists now but it was a firehouse that was converted into an arts space with mix media stuff. So what they did was they recorded him playing this piece on hubkaphone and then had 16 different speakers set up around the room, and we played along to the recording of that.

Taylor: Oh, okay.

Ellman: And then that performance was released on vinyl.

Taylor: I thought that you guys also played some of the songs from the first record.

Ellman: I don't know if that's true. I seem to remember that everything we played was written for it, but I may be forgetting something.

Taylor: Would you say that by that time, more of the intervallic system was developed?

Ellman: Yes, definitely. We had been playing live and we didn't do a record for a long time since that record. We did that record and then we did the Engine 27 thing and then we were just playing. So the playing was developing and we were learning how to play this system. So definitely by the time we did the Engine 27 thing, we were dealing with that.

That piece, though, was specifically written around that. I mean, we had soloing and stuff, but we were playing along to a time counter screen that was in front of us because we had to link everything we were playing to the hubkaphone. So we were a little bit locked down. I would say that that particular recording is an interesting thing in the timeline of Zooid, but in terms of us really being able to present the language, unfortunately it's not good. There are probably bootlegs of us live in Europe that are much more representative of that period.

Taylor: What about by the time you did *Volume 1*?

Ellman: That was an interesting time because the band had kind of changed personnel a little bit. From my perspective, it was actually pretty cool because we

did a tour as just a 5-piece. We had always been 6 pieces. But we had Stomu back in the band playing bass, and we didn't have cello, so it was just tuba, guitar, drum, Henry with his instruments and bass, and Jose doubling on tuba and trombone. I really liked it because I felt like we had a lot of space, but I know that Henry was missing a certain part. But I enjoyed that tour. We did a tour with that group and then we went straight into the studio and that was a nice long three week tour.

Taylor: You went into the studio to do *Volume 1*?

Ellman: We did a three week tour in Europe and then we came back, did a couple of gigs at Roulette, and then we went straight into the studio. We basically had a month playing this music. We had been playing some of that material already for a couple years before because we hadn't made a record in a while, so we had a lot of material. So we did both *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* over the same weekend.

Taylor: Oh wow, I didn't realize that.

Ellman: We recorded a ton of music right after that tour so that's why it came out as *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* because he wanted to spread it out. So, that's how we did that. We were in a really good zone. And now we just did another record, but we added back cello into the group and we did the same thing. We went on the road came back and did it.

Taylor: And that's music you'll be playing at The Jazz Gallery?

Ellman: Yes.

Taylor: Nice.

Ellman: This is the stuff I've been showing you. But you know, the intervallic thing is one thing, but I always try and say that that's a harmonic structure thing that helps Henry realize his music. It's useful in terms of being able to improvise all of his music and being able to digest that. From a theoretical standpoint, in order to understand his harmony, that's useful. But what I always try and tell people is that attention should be paid to what he's doing with the form. To me, that's the most innovative thing about his music. Every time we go out to play, he will re-arrange all the material. We will never go out and the same piece twice in the same way. I mean, once we go out on the road, we will play it the same way through that tour.

Taylor: Does he ever re-arrange things in real-time?

Ellman: You mean on stage?

Taylor: Yeah.

Ellman: Not usually because it's complicated enough and if you start, simply because it is so interesting, complicated and varied in its design and not stagnant, I don't think he ever feels like he needs to change it up. Like I told you, because we have to change it up so often, we have it all memorized anyway. I don't think that he would feel the need or the desire to mess with that in the moment.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: But after the show he might. Or before we go on, he might say, "Why don't you take a solo over this part and I'll take a solo over that part instead?" But he doesn't usually do that on the stage because we are really pretty much

focused on what we're going to play, and, like I said, the stuff is complicated enough that you don't want to throw a wrench in there. One of the great things about working with Henry is that he enjoys the challenge. If something is going wrong, I think sometimes he does want to make something more complicated because we got it down. Then he offers up another idea. He will change it up because he never wants to get too comfortable.

Taylor: Yeah, I've always thought that was is an underrated skill, being comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Ellman: Yeah, I wouldn't call it uncomfortable. It's more about letting the element of surprise stay there.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: Not letting the music become boring for him is critical. If everybody's up there and they know the shit too well and they're playing their best shit all the time, to him, he doesn't want to know what's going to happen every time. I remember one time, he did do something before we went on. He said that we were going to play this twice as slow, which is something he does do sometimes now. He'll give you the written music and say, "Okay double the value of that." If it was sixteenth notes, now they are all eight notes. It almost sounds like Kabuki.

Taylor: Wow.

Ellman: (sings example) Trying to let that tempo into your body can be a challenge. I remember he did that one time at some festival somewhere and we all got off. We were wowed by what was happening, but in that band, because we know each other so well, when something goes wrong, we just make music.

Eventually we'll hear. There might be a little bit of ambiguity for a second and then something will happen and we'll be right back on it. So it's okay. And then we'll come off the stage. I know certain band leaders would be like "Fuck man, that was fucked up!" Henry will say "Wow, that was interesting."

Taylor: Roscoe Mitchell is like that, too, with a lot of his music.

Ellman: I could see that. But it's the energy of of it. Henry as a bandleader, at least from my experience, in the band is always so much fun. He really wants the music to be enjoyable.

Taylor: And accessible, too, I would think. What has always amazed me about his music is how hard it's grooving, not just the bass part or the drums, but the whole composition.

Ellman: Well, some people say it's because he played in marching bands or because he played in the Army and all this stuff. There's no doubt that something someone did earlier in their life has influenced their music, but I just think that's how he hears music. He has a system, but he's not writing from an academic standpoint. He's writing intuitively. If he doesn't like the way something sounds, he changes it. He's not writing from a system just to write. All this stuff he would throw out in a minute if he didn't like the way it was sounding.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: He's not interested in developing a system so that he can tell everybody about his system. As a matter of fact, he doesn't like talking about it with people. People are always trying to get him to open up and talk about it. They say, "How does it work?" He says, "Come up with your own system (laughter). What I do

with my music is not as important than what you do with your music.”

Taylor: I’m more interested in Threadgill’s process as a composer.

Ellman: That’s why I talk about him in terms of his band-leading skills because I think that first of all, he’s looking for musicians who are giving in terms of time and energy. He wants people who come in and want to be there. It’s obvious if you want to be there. If you’re missing rehearsals and acting uninterested, he’s just going to replace you because no matter how good you are, if you don’t put the time in, you can’t play his music.

It’s a luxury that he has being who he is. If he calls you, you probably know who he is, and either you want to do it or you don’t. So if you want to do it, you want to do it. A lot of people in our generation or younger haven’t necessarily earned that type of devotion yet, so you can’t get that from them. You can develop that, though. And I think that a lot of the people in my peer group have been developing that.

You just have to find the right people because everybody wants to make the best music they can make. But that’s the thing to take away from him. You have to find people who are really interested in what you are doing and you have to share the time with them. You have to make them feel like they are part of it. You have to write music for them, trying to expand on what they do.

He writes stuff for me at the very top of my guitar and at the very bottom and gives me techniques, like “trill this” and “pluck that.” He’s got dynamics and all these things. He has stuff that on a regular jazz gig, you don’t get. They just give you a chart and I say, “Well what do you want me to do?” “You know. Just

do.” Well, that’s okay, I can do stuff. But with Henry, he is going to try and tell you what string to play it on. “What does it sound like if you play it there? Oh great, can you do that? Is that possible? Cool, I like that.” And then you can say, “Well, what if we do it like this?” So you feel like your opinion makes the music better and you have a lot at stake. And it’s reciprocal with loyalty. He’s had this band for a long time.

Taylor: The way the music business works now goes completely against that concept.

Ellman: It does. The thing about Henry is that he’s in that unique position where the gigs that we get are good quality gigs. We’re not on the road as much as a lot of other folks, but when we are on the road, they are good quality gigs. They pay decently, so you know when it’s on, it’s going to be good.

Taylor: That helps.

Ellman: It helps because you can afford to say, “Let’s do 6 rehearsals.” But it’s also a way of thinking. If we play at The Jazz Gallery, we’re not playing The Jazz Gallery for the money.

Taylor: Obviously.

Ellman: But a lot of people think of it that way. Henry says, “We’re going to do six rehearsals when we play at The Jazz Gallery,” whereas any other person playing The Jazz Gallery...

Taylor: ...would complain about even doing one rehearsal.

Ellman: For him, we’re going to do it so we can stay fresh on the music. For him, the Jazz Gallery is a rehearsal. But, we have to be willing to be a part of that. I’m

going to do six rehearsals. They're not paid rehearsals, but we're going to do them. But when we rehearse, it's fun. We'll do one rehearsal and he'll say that we're just going to work on these three pieces for three hours.

We'll play for an hour and a half and we'll experiment. Then we'll take a break for a half an hour and he'll tell stories. We'll eat a sandwich and someone will smoke a cigarette and we're just relaxing. We have this camaraderie.

We look forward to the rehearsals. The rehearsals are fun. I'm going to play music for three hours with Henry Threadgill. That doesn't feel like work to me. Do you know what I mean?

Taylor: Yeah.

Ellman: That's the mentality. So if we're playing at the Jazz Gallery, it's because we need to play because we have a tour coming up. We're not thinking of The Jazz Gallery as income, although we get paid a little something. When we go to Europe or do something at Roulette, we are paid decently. We have done things with string quartets and we've done things with percussion ensembles. Now, he's writing a piece for Zooid with a brass quartet.

None of these things wind up being recorded because no one wants to pay for that. That's the one industry part that screws Henry. There is all this great material and large format stuff that no one ever hears. He gave me a cassette tape of the Brooklyn Philharmonic. He wrote this piece for the Brooklyn Philharmonic and Max Roach.

Taylor: Wow!

Ellman: No one really knows about it. And I listen to this thing and I'm like,

“Damn, Henry’s string music with Max doing his thing.” This is a historically significant piece of music that I’m listening to right here. It’s lost and it will never be in the books.

Taylor: Yeah.

Ellman: Yet, another thing.

Taylor: A tragedy.

Ellman: It is, but, that’s the point. For him, it’s like any opportunity to make this music happen should be utilized. If you have people around you who are into it, you come at it a different way. It’s being a bandleader. You lose money playing your own music, but if you play as a sideman, you say, “Well if I make money from that, then I can lose money playing my own music.” The end goal is to develop this thing and take it somewhere.

If you’re only focused on this day, then you can’t really make it happen. You have to think about the bigger picture. That’s how Henry leads the band. Sometimes we’ll play Roulette. It pays better, it’s more prestigious, but you can’t play there enough to only play there. So you play at The Jazz Gallery and get a chance to play out and get it together. And that’s what people have to do.

It’s especially harder for younger people because the financial thing is difficult to navigate. It’s like, “Okay, that’s great, you want to go play with Henry for three hours six times. Well, that’s good for you, but I have to pay my bills.” But the time I put in has come back to me ten fold from what I’ve learned from Henry in terms of the experience and what I got out of it professionally.

Taylor: Sure. I want to ask you about one last thing. If I have any follow-up

questions, is it okay if I contact you later?

Ellman: Yeah, man. Anytime.

Taylor: I want to talk about the sound of the Zooid recordings. I've read that you're a big part of producing and engineering the last several records. They sound amazing. What's your approach to recording the band?

Ellman: Well, thank you for that. Well, you know I'd say that there are different aspects about that. The first most important aspect of it is understanding the music that you're recording and trying to capture it in a way that really respects the composition. Henry likes to record with all of us in the same room. From an engineering standpoint, that presents a real challenge, especially dealing with the drums.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: So, we recorded at this place Brooklyn Recording. They got a great board and great mic's. They have everything you need. They have a nice vibe. They have a nice open room to play in and a nice green room to sit and have coffee, which is a part of the Zooid thing.

We need to be in a studio where there is a social aspect. Part of why he likes that studio is because there's a place we can hang out, eat and have coffee and there are all of these instruments there. That's a part of staying in that energy. He doesn't want to go too long. He doesn't want to do a 10 hour day when we're burnt out.

He's 68 now. That's another mistake we made is trying to do the whole thing in one day. Usually after the 5th hour, you're beat. You might have already

played the best stuff but you're going to keep going on because of the finances. I mean, that's real, but at the same time with Henry, we're never going to go in for just one day. We are going to have at least two days.

We're going to make sure that we're enjoying it. We're going to take our time. We're going to set up right. That's always the longest part, setting up. We try to set up in a way to make sure we feel comfortable playing and that we're really listening and getting the stuff recorded right as best we can. The one challenge with Zooid for me as a mixing engineer is that when we're playing really loud the drums are bleeding into everyone's mic's. There's a little bit of a challenge in taming that because it makes the drums sound a little harsh.

The thing is that I really know how to listen to this music. I know how all of the combinations sound. I know how the instruments are suppose to sound. I know what parts are suppose to be featured where in terms of bringing out different parts of the line and because Henry can come over, I'll set there and I'll massage everything and get everything the way that I think it should sound. Henry will come over and we'll sit together and if he feels like someone's part should be louder, than we can do it. This is where I do it, in my home, so we can take as long as we want. We're not going to mix it in one day and then regret it next week and then the record comes out. We don't do that.

Taylor: You take your time.

Ellman: I'll put in hours own my own but then Henry will come in and again we don't overdo it. We'll work on two or three pieces. Then he'll split and come back a week later and we'll work some more and then he'll listen to what we've

done. Then he'll come back. As long as we get it done in time for the production schedule, we're cool. But we're not on the clock. I get paid for it.

Taylor: There's no rush.

Ellman: Right. I do a lot of mixing for other people. I don't do by the hour. I just feel like it's not a good way to work. Once you own the hour, then that's all people are thinking about it. How many hours is this going to be? So I just put out there in the beginning this is the base rate. This is what it's going to cost and it might cost a little more. And it's a low rate anyway. I say this is what it's going to cost and if I feel like it's going to push that threshold, I'll let you know. But I feel like it's more important to feel comfortable and taking the time you need to get it right.

In terms of the sound of the whole thing, I think in the past, very talented people have worked on Henry's records but they have a sound of their own that's not related to the sound of the band because that's how engineers are. Every engineer has their own way of hearing things. I think that the reason it is successful for me is because of my intimacy with the group. I really know the sound of these guys. It's not like I want Stomu's bass to sound the way I want a bass to sound, I want it to sound like Stomu.

Taylor: Right.

Ellman: And he gets to come over and hear it and say, "Ah, that's it."

Taylor: I think that's a great thing to be on both sides of things.

Ellman: I think a lot of musicians enjoy working with me because they can say, "At the end of the bar of seven in the B section, can you remove that last high hat

click?” And I can say, “Yeah, we can fix that.” And it’s just like that. We just do it and move on.

Really good engineers know how to communicate with the musicians. I don’t think it’s mandatory, but I feel like the best engineers develop that language and they can read a score and figure out how to deal with what’s happening. Especially the way everything is done with Protools. With Henry, we usually do one take. On the *This Brings Us To* recordings, pretty much everything we did was one take.

Taylor: One take? Wow!

Ellman: There might have been one take where we had to fix an ending and one other thing we used second take. I think on this new record there is a mixture of first and second takes.

Taylor: Okay.

Ellman: We used very little editing. We just try and play how we play live. This music happens. Whether or not these two parts play it perfectly, whatever, but then if we want to fix them, we can. But I think that the real thing is the luxury of me having the knowledge and the gear. We also use analogue stuff. We didn’t go to tape, but we used really good stuff then I used outboard gear. We’re trying to make it sound really good and really pay attention to the sound of the recording as part of the presentation.

Interview with bassist Stomu Takeishi**11/20/14****Williamsburg, Brooklyn**

Stomu Takeishi was a member of Make a Move and performed with Zooid until 2012. He generally plays fretless five-string electric bass guitar as well as a Klein five-string acoustic bass guitar. Takeishi began as a koto player. He came from Japan to the United States in 1983 to attend Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. After completing his degree in 1986, he moved to Manhattan to continue his studies at The New School. He has lived in New York City ever since. In Downbeat's 57th Critics Poll in 2009, Stomu was the poll winner for the category of Electric Bass, Rising Star.

Taylor: How did you get introduced to Threadgill's music?

Takeishi: Brandon came to one of my gigs. At that time, I didn't know who Henry was. I didn't know who Brandon was. I was in a completely different music scene at that time. Brandon was talking to me and he seemed like a nice guy.

Taylor: He didn't know you?

Takeishi: That was the first time he saw me. I think at that time Henry was looking for a bass player, so Brandon recommended that I come to the audition. I did the audition without Henry.

Taylor: Henry wasn't there?

Takeishi: No because he was living in India at the time.

Taylor: Oh, so was it J.T.?

Takeishi: It was J.T., Tony Cedras and Brandon. Yeah, so I guess I got the gig.

Taylor: Yeah, that's great.

Takeishi: The first time I met Henry was at rehearsal. I was already in the band. We had 10 days to rehearse and then we had a one week gig at the Knitting Factory and then we had a recording. I didn't know his music at all and that was my first recording with him. That was very hard in the beginning because I never worked with anyone like Henry before.

It was about finding your own voice through his music. He was really challenging me a lot. I thought I couldn't do it. There was one rehearsal where I got screamed at so much. I told Tony I don't think I'm going to make it (laughter). J.T. and Tony said, "No, no, he's only doing that because he thinks you can get it." After that rehearsal he never screamed at me again (laughter).

Taylor: That's amazing. A huge part of my thesis is explaining Threadgill's compositional techniques and his use of form. One thing that's incredible about his music is that it's hard to analyze. If you have the score and listen to the music, you don't know what is going on because of the different techniques he uses.

Takeishi: Sometimes a song can be very short, like there are only 4 bars or 8 bars that doesn't sound like it's repeating. It makes you wonder what's going on?

Taylor: Exactly, I was talking with Brandon about when Threadgill first started using cells in Make a Move.

Takeishi: He didn't have the number system. He brought that in maybe four years after Make a Move started playing. We had no idea. We had so much

training in a certain way. It's like a language. We had to completely speak English the backward way. Skipping something, it was crazy in the beginning. It was so challenging. Threadgill was really patient.

Taylor: Can I show you some stuff I've been working on?

Takeishi: Sure.

Taylor: I've been working on the song *See the Blackbird Now*.

Takeishi: Yeah, great.

Taylor: Oh wait. Let's get back to Make a Move and the idea of expansion and doubling things.

Takeishi: Basically all three of these are the same chord. These harmonies are based on this.

Taylor: Right. They're based on the intervallic set.

Takeishi: You can play any of these numbers.

Taylor: Right. But was he using this system in the beginning of Make a Move?

Takeishi: No he wasn't. I'd say Make a Move was 1995 maybe. He started introducing these things in 1999 or somewhere around that time.

Taylor: So before that what did he do?

Takeishi: Before that he would have regular harmony. He had harmony that was is used by most jazz players. He didn't use any of these number systems. There was harmony and you just played the harmony, like E over C minor to Bb over D. We played harmonies that you are used to seeing.

Taylor: For the new system, I've noticed that you are mostly playing the root of the cells.

Takeishi: Jose and I switch. Basically we have three guys playing the harmony behind the cello solo and behind the guitar solo, and also Henry's solo. There's basically three guys, either me or Jose play the bottom. If Jose plays the bottom, then I play the top.

Taylor: When you say top, do you mean...

Takeishi: I mean the second one. And then Liberty or Chris will play the top.

Taylor: So you play the middle note?

Takeishi: Yeah. In the beginning, we didn't have Chris so I was playing more of the middle notes.

Taylor: I've transcribed a lot of your bass playing because I feel like you are really the anchor of the band. Without that anchor, I'm lost.

Takeishi: Yeah, even if I sound like I'm playing open, I only play the notes from the harmony.

Taylor: I know! That's what I've discovered. You're always hitting the roots. Rhythmically you're...

Takeishi: Rhythmically I experiment, but I always hit the right notes.

Taylor: Exactly.

Takeishi: If you start to listen to the drums, forget about the drums.

Taylor: No, no, you can't hear what's happening. So what I did was I compared the intervals in the melody with the intervals in the intervallic set. They all match up perfectly. But when I compared Henry's flute solo to the intervallic sets, a few times they were off.

Takeishi: Yeah I know.

Taylor: But even with tonal harmony you have room to alter the rules.

Takeishi: Exactly. So sometimes you hear it's not in the intervals or you hear something really strong and you just hit those things.

Taylor: I've also noticed that you emphasize certain notes on occasion, but it's never on the downbeat. Is that intentional?

Takeishi: Of course.

Taylor: That's very hip.

Takeishi: Sometimes I will move the root just a little to create this tension so people cannot anticipate what is happening to create some different shapes. Sometimes people get lost but there are always certain roots that when you hit them, people always know that's where it is. We get lost all the time.

Taylor: You do?

Takeishi: Yeah everybody. Sometimes when Jose plays Jose doesn't... I make a mistake you when the bass player makes a mistake everybody has to follow the bass player.

Taylor: Right, because you are the foundation.

Takeishi: Not only do you have to follow me, but you also have to memorize everybody's harmony.

Taylor: Really?

Takeishi: That's the only way we can stay together.

Taylor: That's a good point.

Takeishi: So if I play the bass, I can sing over that harmony because I hear it.

Taylor: What are the rehearsals like?

Takeishi: They're fun. He likes to take it very slow. Sometimes we will just rehearse one bar. We will play it slow so that we really hear the harmony and the melody. The whole point of his music to me is to not remember your part but to memorize everybody else's part.

Taylor: Right.

Takeishi: It's a little bit like classical music without a conductor. The first thing I always try and memorize is Henry's melody and then I memorize some other stuff. My parts are usually the last thing I memorize.

Taylor: I know from talking with Liberty that you have to be careful writing things down because things change a lot.

Takeishi: I just memorize things for that day and then I forget it. He changes things all the time. The first time with Make A Move, when we got the music it was so hard for everybody. We had this tour in Europe, a three week tour playing everyday. One day, we finally got it. As soon as that happened, he changed the whole thing (laughter). If things get too comfortable, it's not fun anymore. He's always like this (laughter).

Taylor: What about retrograde motion? Was he playing things backwards in Make a Move?

Takeishi: Yes. And he would stretch the bar. He would call this long meter. He'd call this one beat then two beats. During the solo, this becomes two beats and this becomes four beats.

Taylor: Does he ever triple the time?

Takeishi: Yes. There is one song where he triples the time. It's very confusing.

Taylor: I can imagine. Do you understand his compositional process?

Takeishi: You have to understand he came up with the system first. He didn't come up with the composition first, he came up with the system first. Most people, say 99% of composers who come up with a system, compose songs that sound like mathematics. There are a lot of composers like that. With Henry, even though he came up with a system first, his songs always sound like folk songs. They sound like something like your mother sang when you were a kid. I don't know how he does it.

Conclusion

Threadgill's music is a process. The written material is just a starting point. Although his music falls outside of the mainstream, many of the devices he utilizes such as rhythmic independence, a synthesis of musical influences, collective improvisation and composition are part of a jazz tradition. Threadgill's process would not be possible without the dedicated musicians who have taken the time and care in learning his musical language.

There are still many unanswered questions. There are some cells in *See the Blackbird Now* that seem to have mutated beyond the standard operation. How is this accomplished? Kavee has his own numbering system that he has incorporated into Threadgill's music. How does this work? How does Threadgill specifically deal with voicing's regarding instrumentation? Perhaps the only way to gain further insight into Threadgill's Zooid music is to have the opportunity to play it.

Instead of perceiving Threadgill as a jazz outsider, it's possible to see him in a different light. The jazz tradition has always included innovation, collective improvisation, composition and rhythmic independence. Threadgill's music is part of that tradition. Historically, jazz music has always been a process of synthesis and this process is the essence behind Threadgill's music.

Notes

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Selected Discography

Album Title	Performers	Record label	Year
Everybody's Mouth's a Book	Henry Threadgill Bryan Carrot Brandon Ross Stomu Takeishi Dafnis Prieto	Pi recordings	2001
Up Popped Two Lips	Henry Threadgill Liberty Ellman Tarik Benbrahim Jose Davila Dana Leong Dafnis Prieto	Pi recordings	2001
Pop, Start the Tape, Stop	Henry Threadgill Liberty Ellman Tarik Benbrahim Dana Leong Jose Davila Elliot Humberto Kavee	Hard Edge	2005
This Brings Us To, Volume I	Henry Threadgill Liberty Ellman Jose Davila Stomu Takeishi Elliot Humberto Kavee	Pi Recordings	2009
This Brings Us To, Volume 2	Henry Threadgill Liberty Ellman Jose Davila Stomu Takeishi Elliot Humberto Kavee	Pi Recordings	2008
Tomorrow Sunny / The Revery, Spp	Henry Threadgill Liberty Ellman Stomu Takeishi Jose Davila Christopher Hoffman Elliot Humberto Kavee	Pi Recordings	2011

A complete Theadgill discography compiled by Lars Backstrom can be found here : [Henry Threadgill Discography](#)

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[C] = concert review
[D] = discography
[F] = feature article
[I] = interview
["I"] = article written by the respective musician himself
[N] = (very short) news item
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Germán Lázaro: Henry Threadgill. Alguna cosa más, in: Cuadernos de Jazz, #110 (Jan/Feb.2009), p. 58-59 (F/I)

Drew Jarrett: Language Barrier. Four decades on from his recorded debut, saxophonist/reeds player and jazz composer Henry Threadgill is still inventing new compositional strategies for unusual ensembles. Here he talks to Hank Shteamer about the impetus for constant evolution behind his work with Air, The Sextett, Very Very Circus, Zood and more, in: The Wire, #309 (Nov.2009), p. 34-39 (F/I)

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Wolf Kampmann: Henrys Welt. Eine Betrachtung der Musik Henry Threadgills. Es gibt nicht mehr allzu viele aktive Jazzmusiker, die mit ihrem heutigen Output immer noch als Autoritäten der Jazzgeschichte wahrgenommen werden. Einer von ihnen ist ohne Zweifel Altsaxofonist und Flötist Henry Threadgill, in: Jazzthetik, 25/1-2 (Jan/Feb.2011), p. 22-27 (F/I) [digi.copy]

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Kevin Le Gendre: Closer to Another Source. Recognition is a contentious issue in any field and jazz is no different. Although there are "sacred monsters" whose place in history is assured, a case can be made for a number of musicians whose contribution has been undervalued for one reason or another. Yet these unsung heroes do have a place in the hearts of many fans and musicians, and are essential to our wider understanding of the ongoing development of jazz. Kevin Le Gendre turns the spotlight on a few of the troopers, such as Henry Threadgill, Von Freeman, Bunky Green and Steve Coleman, who could yet emerge triumphant from the long dark, in: Jazzwise, #155 (Aug.2011), p. 24-27 (F)

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