

## Improvisation, Correlation, and Vibration: An Interview with Steve Coleman

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While working on a study on the relation between improvisation and language, I asked saxophonist Steve Coleman to participate in a Berlin-New York phone interview. Although I was well aware of how outspoken and eloquent an artist Coleman is (an amateur saxophonist myself, I had taken Steve's improvisation class at U.C. Berkeley, where he taught from 2000 to 2002), I was taken by surprise by Steve's endurance. After two hours, I ran out of fresh tape. Luckily I found some old ones to overdub, as Steve kept unfolding his philosophy of cosmic energy, as well as his ideas on improvisation, language, structure, freedom and innovation, often making his points with the help of highly personal anecdotes. Still going strong after four hours non-stop, Steve explained his motivation: "If we're going to do this, we better do it right."<sup>1</sup>

**Johannes Völz:** Steve, I want to talk to you about improvisation today. I am interested in a very specific aspect of improvisation, namely the relation between improvisation and language. Many musicians have described jazz improvisation using the metaphor of language. That could mean many different things. Let's start with the idiomatic aspect of language because that has dominated the public discourse in the last years, especially in the wake of the debates around Wynton Marsalis's views on jazz. Marsalis supports a view that he shares with, among others, Albert Murray. Murray speaks of "idiomatic authenticity," stressing that improvisation is not about the performer trying to express some sort of interiority but rather mastering an idiom or a language. I have a quote for you from Murray's *Stomping the Blues*: "Nor does the authenticity of any performance of blues music depend upon the musician being true to his own private feelings. It depends upon his idiomatic ease and consistency." (99) Let's touch on this aspect first, on this specific sense of the language metaphor.

**Steve Coleman:** First of all, let me clarify what we are talking about. You asked about "jazz improvisation." I don't think of what I'm playing as 'jazz' and I don't think of myself as following a 'jazz tradition.' I also do not see Parker, Coltrane, etc. as 'jazz' and I see myself as being very much in the same tradition that those people were part of. Now, before we get into the language issue, I want to talk about one other thing, which is, I don't know how much of a musician Albert Murray is. I think he is a great writer and more what they would have called in the old days a philosopher. The tradition of writing about music and thinking about music goes way, way back and that tradition is normally a separate tradition from the playing of music. Philosophers are usually very well-read and they draw upon a wide range of literary material. Musicians, for the most part, simply play. I'm not saying musicians are dumb or anything like that, but musicians draw from other musicians. Of course, you have guys like Wynton. Wynton is well-read, Coltrane was very well-read, for that matter. But initially, when they get into the music, their initial impetus is the music itself, so the decisions that they make based on moving forward with the music have to do with what's happening currently in their time, what they have to deal with on their instrument, what styles are current, getting work, certain very practical things. In that sense, I think of music as a craft more than an art.

**J.V.:** Doesn't this suggest that the musician lives in some kind of vacuum? I would think that they are involved in all kinds of issues, be they political, be they philosophical. Don't they bring all of that to their craft?

**S.C.:** Yes, but that comes later. When guys start reading a lot and everything, they may get into an attitude where they start thinking about the art of music. This is one thing that happened a lot in the forties and fifties, for example, when black people in the United States were struggling for just recognition as human beings and everything, and they generally compared themselves to the culture that was the dominant culture of America at that time. So therefore a lot of times they compared themselves to their white counterparts and would say things like, "well, our music needs to be played at Carnegie Hall," and things like that – that shows you the model that they were using. And some people even went as far as letting those elements influence their music. I see that in groups like the Modern Jazz Quartet. They were saying, my music is not conducive to playing in clubs, I want to play on concert stages. Later on, as people started getting more integrated, they also started to integrate the idea of the music. But, you know, you still had the necessity of, I got to play a gig, I got to feed my family, that kind of thing, and the actual function of the music within the community, depending on what kind of community you were dealing with.

**J.V.:** The community is just it. If that is the actual function, then the practical concerns of playing include the communal aspects. In that sense I don't see how a writer like Murray underestimates the actual concerns of playing music.

**S.C.:** First of all, the situation today is a little different in terms of this music that we're talking about now and the so-called community. Generally speaking, this music is not really a part of the black community – that's the best way to say it. Not in an obvious sense, anyway. It's coming from the black community, culturally speaking. From the standpoint of diversity, black people are doing lots of different things nowadays, and some people, like me, for example, choose to play music, and we don't negate our culture just because we play this particular kind of music as opposed to something that LL Cool J might do or something like that. At the same time, people need a reason to play music. They need to feel like I have a reason that I'm

going to do this. But to come back to the larger point, philosophers or writers are writing about an ideal intellectual situation and they're not taking into account the complex parameters that are being dealt with and that are all happening at once. The reason why you play changes depending on what style of music you're into. For example, Coltrane's reasons and Louis Armstrong's reasons weren't exactly the same, even though you could say that Coltrane is an extension of that tradition. Therefore, Coltrane's music eventually became a form of prayer or an inner expression dealing with the relationship of man to the universe and expanding consciousness and all this kind of stuff. And Louis Armstrong's music was an expression of what's happening inside of him in terms of what he sees, but he comes from a very different society and from a different time, so he thinks of the entertainment as important – something that Coltrane doesn't view as the most important element. I mean, I know that's true with me. When I go on stage, I'm not looking at it from a minstrel standpoint, I'm not looking at it from the standpoint. I'm coming out and when I leave, these people have to be happy. It's more of an expression thing.

**J.V.:** But if you're saying that playing is about personal expression, you're in basic agreement with what most writers have said about jazz at least since the thirties, and what Murray, for instance, is arguing against. Jazz criticism has been based so much on the romantic idea of the individual soloist expressing inner feelings.

**S.C.:** Let me explain it this way: I didn't start off playing music with some kind of theory in my mind. I wasn't thinking exactly the way I'm thinking now. I started off playing the instrument simply because I liked music. I liked the feel of the instrument, I liked making sounds and everything. I thought it was fun. I was a teenager, you know. As I realized there was a higher level of playing involved, I decided at some point, okay, I really want to learn how to improvise. I didn't really deal with a whole lot of psychological shit as far as why I wanted to do that. It was like, this is interesting, I'm following what I'm feeling. And I've always followed what I felt. I think that's the driving force. And then what I'm playing has a lot to do, has everything to do, with what I feel. It doesn't matter what kind of intellectual shit I've studied, even all of that is guided by what I feel, which things I decide to study. I'm trying to play as much me as I can and so therefore, feeling or emotion and spirituality, which are a higher form of that, have everything to do with what I'm doing. In that sense I completely disagree with what Albert is saying. From a musician's standpoint.

**J.V.:** What about the other viewpoint?

**S.C.:** From a philosophical standpoint, looking at the whole thing more as an overview, I can see all this idiomatic stuff that Albert is talking about. But that stuff develops as a result of the dialogue between the musician, the culture and all of that. In any particular culture, in any particular place, you're going to have idiomatic stuff. Human beings are creatures of habit. Certain habits will develop in any music any time. Even if you deliberately try to avoid habits you develop other habits trying to do that.

**J.V.:** But isn't there a choice you have to make: Either approach the idiom the way Albert suggests, or go for personal expression? It has certainly been framed that way, as an either-or question. And that has led to modernist credos like "Make it new," which often meant not only avoiding habits but also idioms.

**S.C.:** But it's not an either-or question. It's a matter of perspective. I think you'll always be able to step back and see certain trends in what people were doing at a certain point. But just as much, you'll miss certain things because you aren't in their time. From the standpoint of stepping back and writing about it, your analysis is always going to be flawed – on two levels. One, because of the time difference; and two, because you're not actually one of the participants. Now, in the case of Wynton, he's influenced by the writings of Albert Murray and certain other people, Richard Wagner, whoever. He reads a lot of different stuff, as I do, and as other people do, too. And over time this starts to affect your thinking and affect the choices you make and everything. I am influenced by what I read and it's generating more detailed thinking in those directions. So it could be good, it could be bad, but it usually doesn't have a whole lot to do with the music itself because these people are usually not participants.

**J.V.:** That's the reason I'm interviewing musicians, you see.

**S.C.:** I know, but I'm just giving you that subtext as a setup really for the differences between, for example, what musicians might think (and if they're being honest, there's a lot of practical consideration in there) and what you might read in jazz publications, which are generally written by non-musicians or by musicians who didn't make it, I mean guys who didn't quite make it to playing. They started a little bit and then they went on to write.

**J.V.:** Let's come back to improvisation and language then. What do you think personally about the metaphor of language for improvising? Does this metaphor make sense to you, does it have any meaning?

**S.C.:** Yes, I do think about it in these terms, it's just that that's not the only terms I think about it in. That's just one aspect, because I mean it depends on what you mean when you say 'language.' Can you define what you're talking about? Are you talking about English, French, Spanish? Or do you mean the broader sense of communication and things like that?

**J.V.:** That's what I'm asking you. See, when I first started doing interviews with musicians about improvisation, it was the musicians who brought up the language metaphor in virtually every interview. And I kept asking, "What do you mean by that?" And I would get all kinds of different answers.

**S.C.:** Okay, so I'll tell you what I mean by language. The first thing is the language itself. For me, language is basically communication, and by communication I don't just mean words, and certainly don't just mean written words. For me, it means communication through whatever means possible, vibration, gesture, whatever. I have a girlfriend, we communicate in all kinds of ways, we don't just sit down and talk all the time. You have some talkative people; there are girls who will say, "You never talk to me," you know, you have this kind of thing. But we communicate in all kinds of ways, making love, for example, is communication, as is having sex without love; eating together, cooking together, going to an amusement park or just sitting there looking at each other. Especially if people are really close there are a lot of gestures and things people do in communicating which words just enhance. I look at words as the details that take over when gestures can't do it alone. Now, the reason that I know this is true is that for a long time I've been dealing with this woman in Cuba. In the beginning of our relationship she spoke no English, zero. Zero. I spoke zero Spanish. I mean zero. How can we have a relationship, how did we get together? I think about this a lot. What was our initial communication based on?

**J.V.:** Don't tell me it was music.

**S.C.:** No, it was primarily gesture. There was this understanding that came purely out of vibration, to tell you the truth. It didn't come out of "Oh, you know, I find it interesting what you are saying." And many of my friends, especially my girl friends, questioned the whole relationship based on that exactly. They were always telling me, "Steve! You don't even understand her! I don't get this. You guys can't talk, and you're a very intellectual person." But I enjoyed being with her. Okay, we couldn't talk, we had to work on that; we still don't sit down and have a conversation about relativity – I mean we do, but it's a struggle. But over the years, she still doesn't speak good English, and I still don't speak good Spanish, but we developed sort of this hybrid language of gestures, grunts, half-English and half-Spanish words. And I'll tell you something now. I went to a restaurant with her pretty recently, it was me, her, and my bass player Anthony Tidd and one of her friends. When I talked to her, her friend couldn't understand a thing we were talking about and my friend couldn't understand a thing we were talking about. That's when I realized we had developed our own language. This whole experience made me look again at language and communication, and that's really my point. As I said, this relationship started without words, and I thought maybe words aren't too important. It made me think of a lot of things that we are talking about right now as far as language goes.

**J.V.:** Communication through music, I assume, would be somewhere on a level between gesture and words?

**S.C.:** Music and words are on a completely different level. I mean I've had the experience when people have come up to me to tell me how much they get out of my music and this and that. And they're talking through a translator because they don't speak any English. So that makes me think, this person is receiving something very, very strong, and language has nothing to do with it, not language like French, German, English. Because I'm using sound to communicate there's something about these sounds that is communicating to this person. So when I'm talking about language, based on my life experience, my concept of language really has to do with communication, which starts on the level of vibration more than anything else, amplified by gesture, amplified by words.

**J.V.:** Now, when you play music, are there specific ways in which you try to incorporate that concept of communication through sound?

**S.C.:** When I approach music, I start with vibration, and then I amplify that to things that another person may pick up as idiomatic. Of course, with music as a craft, there are technical things you have to deal with. There's always a system involved, whether you think there is one or not. Music in the first place is organized sound. It's not just any sound. If it was just any sound, then anything that makes a sound would be music. You hear people saying that sometimes, but we know, really, that that's not true. For instance, when we hear birds, we may hear them as musical, but they don't have anything to do with our music. We hear them and we may interpret them as music, but they're communicating with each other, in the bird language, whatever that is.

**J.V.:** You're saying birds communicate through sound but only humans can hear music?

**S.C.:** When we hear birds sing like music, it's our response to nature. What we call nature is not really nature. What we call nature is really our response to nature, our interpretation of it.

**J.V.:** You sound like an idealist, Steve, maybe even like a transcendentalist. From a philosopher's standpoint.

**S.C.:** The point is, everything is interpreted, and I don't care what kind of experiment you think you are doing. We set up the experiment, so, by the way, it's not objective. The only objective thing is nature outside of us, and we can't even think, we can't even talk about that. So going back to this idiomatic thing – was that your question about the idiomatic thing?

**J.V.:** Well, the idiomatic structures I had in mind weren't derived from nature but more from specific cultures.

**S.C.:** Again, there is no contradiction, because this is where time comes in. Based on how I feel, and based on the vibrations that I choose to follow, I will choose to make some, let's call it, variations on whatever is popular in my time. But I can't escape my time, I can't think from the perspective of someone who is living in 200 B.C., for example. It's impossible. I don't care how much I've studied it. No matter how much of an imitator I am or how much of a creator I am, all those things, they're all connected to each other through time. The most creative and the most imitative will always be connected, in terms of gesture, in terms of time. The time has a certain power, a certain character, you could say, that imposes its influence on everything and everybody who's living at this time. So it's impossible for you to have a microwave oven, computers, digital watches, and not have this stuff affect your music. That's not possible. Everything you do and everything you are has to affect your music.

**J.V.:** Steve, it sounds somewhat contradictory. Earlier you said that musicians are mostly influenced by other musicians and not by writers, and now you're saying that everything around you affects your music.

**S.C.:** I meant on an intentional level. At first you're mainly concerned with the practical things, but of course even at that point, you can't get out of your culture, you can't get out of your time, you can't get off of your planet. You have all of that that connects us to time itself. Again, it's a question of perspective. What we call idiomatic is all connected to pretty much one time, even when we compare it to the past. If I take the idiomatic things that, let's say, Wynton is doing or David Murray is doing or anybody is doing today and I compare that to what was happening with Charlie Parker, what was happening with Louis Armstrong – well, see, that comparison is done by one person living in one time. I don't really have the perspective that Charlie Parker and those guys had at that time, all I have is my opinion or my view of that from this time. As a result, even my comparison will be influenced by this time. What time do we call our own time? We don't have a name for it. We're simply living, we're making decisions every day based on the influences around you. Nobody will see this detail later on, nobody will ever know that me and you are talking today, if you know what I'm saying, they'll read the article or whatever, but they won't really know what's happening. You could be doing the interview with me, thinking, "Well, Steve is really going off the subject, I wish he would get back on the subject," or whatever, you could be thinking all kinds of shit while you're doing the interview. If you were to write that and somebody would read it a hundred years later, they wouldn't have a clue as to the details of what's going on.

**J.V.:** As a matter of fact, you're not going off the subject, and the question is, if everybody is always, well, in his culture and time, how close or how rigid is the determination? And in the context of improvising, the question is, are there certain musical codes that pretty much determine your improvisation or are you as an individual free to choose what you want to play? I mean, this also has political ramifications. For instance, does improvisation open up any possibilities at all to break out of the strictures of society?

**S.C.:** The answers to those questions all depend on your direction of thinking. Are you thinking in terms of an integrative approach or are you thinking about things in terms of categories. Either you're thinking about the differences in things or the similarities in things. Now I spend most of my time with what I call correlative thought, trying to correlate one thing with another and seeing the similarities and seeing in what sense these things are the same. So I have a lot that I can draw on for my music. I can draw on, like you said, literary sources, but I can also draw on sports. I can draw on this, I can draw on that, and a lot of times I consciously try to make direct connections with that in my music, right down to the technical elements of the music itself. In other words, not just emotionally.

**J.V.:** Can you give an example how that correlative thinking is reflected in your music?

**S.C.:** For example, in 1985 I began to program computers. It was kind of an intuitive thing that led me in that direction. Somebody told me about computers and I had always liked probing into new things. As a little kid I used to take apart walkie-talkies and radios and things like that, so I was attracted to those kinds of things, taking things apart, tinkering, and all this kind of stuff. So when someone told me about computers, which I didn't know anything about, telling me, "they're starting to use computers in music," I said, "what do you mean, computers in music, that's crazy." The guys said, "no, no, there's

something called MIDI now" -- this was very new at the time -- and I said, "MIDI, what's that?" Because of television, of shows like Star Trek, where people always say, "Computer, give me analysis!" and the computer would say, "20 percent oxygen," you know, I thought a computer was a robot. But this guy said, "you can program a computer so it can do what you want." When I heard about the creative aspect, my interest got sparked. I said if I can make it do what I want, maybe I can use it to investigate what I'm already doing. And I really had no idea what I was talking about, it was just a feeling. It was a feeling that I could use this instrument as a tool to further investigate what I was already investigating through music. Because, at the time, what I was particularly interested in, well, there were certain, I don't know how to describe it, geometrical ideas, that's the best way I can put it. It wasn't really geometry because I'm not much of a mathematician, but it had more to do with shapes. And this had to do with the fact that I was an artist before I was a musician. I was influenced by shapes and things like that a lot, and I still am, even in my music today. I wanted to know in more detail what these shapes were and how to translate them more directly into music, and this is dealing with the language of music itself. At first it was just intuitive, just trying to go for certain shapes that I saw in my head, but after a while I thought, that's not enough, I need to know more directly.

**J.V.:** Wait, wait. Now you're saying there's something like a language particular to the medium of music and also a visual language, and you can translate one into the other? You wanted to translate visual shapes into music?

**S.C.:** I wanted to be able to look at a mountain and play the mountain. I used to tell my friends that, and just like you, they said, "what do you mean? You mean being inspired by the mountain?" I said, "no, not just inspired. Of course I'm inspired by it, but I want to play the mountain, literally, play the mountain." They said, "well, what do you mean by that?" I said, "I want to look at the mountain and see something like notation and be able to play it." They thought I was crazy. They would just dismiss what I was saying. But I was serious. I wanted to be able to look at the flight pattern of a bee, the flight pattern of a bird, and play that. Or have that directly influence my music, so almost be able to look at nature as one big gesture. You can call it notation. I mean, what is notation? It's a bunch of symbols that tell you, don't do this, do this. But I wanted to be able to look at life with my eyes as well as with my ears and be able to translate that into sound. That was, and still is, one of my biggest things.

**J.V.:** How could a computer help you to get in touch with nature?

**S.C.:** I thought that maybe by using the computer as a tool I could investigate some aspects of ways of how to do this. I can explain it to you now, but it was an intuition then. Now let me give you one example: In learning the computer and in learning how to deal with the computer, of course there are certain things idiomatic to the computer. If you don't do exactly what it is you are supposed to do, things tend not to work. And when you get into programming, this is even more true. Eventually I got into something called *assembly language* because at the time computers were very slow and in order to do anything you really had to go under the operating system. So you used assembly language, or some people called it *machine language*, which is just this one's-and-zero's-kind of language, very, very raw. And you have to know exactly what it is you're trying to do, and need to get the phrasing in a way that's really exact. So you have to learn these structures, they're all based on what people generally call Boolean logic. When I was learning these structures and everything, what I realized was that there is so much here that is very similar to musical structures. Because, you know, human beings created most structures, so it's not like they're completely different. Even before I got into what I was trying to create, I found myself looking at the similarities between the structures in the programming language and the structures that I'd learned in music. And then I saw, of course, that some things were similar and some things were different. The different things were most interesting to me because I thought, wow, you have this kind of structure in this programming language – we could use a structure like that in music.

**J.V.:** I never realized that your music is structured like a computer language.

**S.C.:** You have to look at it from the direction of correlative thought. I'll give you one example. A lot of times in computers you have this "If-then-or"-type structure. If this, then do this. Or, do this. There could be several or's. So it's like this choice-kind of thing depending on the circumstance of what happens. I thought this kind of structure would be good in music. So, for example, you can have an A-A-B-A form, to use a very typical song form in this idiom. It's also a linear form. And then you have people who don't follow forms like that, they just simply play. What I thought was, well, it would be nice if you could have something in between. It would be nice if you could have this sort of Protean structure where you would have a form but the form is not always the same. The form depends on circumstances that happen musically. It changes according to that, but there is an exact form. For me, this was really what happens more in life. Very rarely does life go according to plan. Because anything could happen. Your plan changes. And you have to make immediate new choices. So I thought I will use this as a metaphor for my music. This happens anyway in music, but I wanted to build it into the structure, which is different than what happens just inside the A-A-B-A form.

**J.V.:** So what kind of form would this be?

**S.C.:** Let's say the form was A-B-C-D, you had four sections, and which section came after the next depended on circumstances. That's an idea I got from looking at programming languages first, but also from looking at life. Life is much more complicated than that, you know. I'll give you a very simple example. Let's say you give the drummer two possible figures to play at the end of a section, I mean, he has two possible rhythmic things that he can play, let's call them a and b, just to give them names. Let's say you have a guitar player with two possible melodic or harmonic figures that he can play, and we'll call them 1 and 2. He has a choice between 1 and 2, but he has to play one of them. The same thing with the drummer. He has to play a or b, and he has to play one of them in that spot. You compose the song in such a way that this spot happens at the same time. So when we get to that spot, obviously we're going to have a-1, a-2, b-1, or b-2. And a and b, and 1 and 2 are really short. They're like two beats or something like that. And so, when we get to that spot, they play those things, and the combination of what they play determines which section we go to. After a-1 we go to A, after a-2 we go to B, b-1 we go to C, and b-2 we go to D. So these are like controls, you could say. They're not random, but they depend on decisions that are being made. It's just like the Boolean logic thing when you program. You have this contingency, and you plan for the contingency. Nothing else can happen, if the guys do what they're supposed to do.

**J.V.:** On a less structured level, this could happen inside the A-A-B-A form as well. You stay inside the form, but you might switch to double time or something like that once one of the musicians signals to go there.

**S.C.:** Of course, we do this all the time even on A-A-B-A forms. It depends on the agreement among the musicians because you play with people that you have a certain agreement with. And some people play these standards in a way such as, we might play in the A-A-B-A form for a while, but it might be completely open after that. It might dissolve into something else. They do that by agreement, you know. And because some musicians thought of that before and it's musically acceptable to do. People do what's musically acceptable among the group of musicians they're playing with, otherwise you end up playing by yourself. Others say, no, we have to keep A-A-B-A, no matter what happens. All of our freedom has to occur inside of A-A-B-A. It's just a matter of which choices you make ahead of time. But either choice is an understanding, and you're dealing with the understanding, and sometimes, well, many times, I'll tell you the truth, it boils down to skill level. It boils down to what you can do. Because some musicians, they are on a high enough level that they actually get a thrill out of being able to keep a structure precisely but being completely free within that. And a lot of times that's the thrill for me in listening to what Art Tatum or Charlie Parker might do. They sound completely free and at the same time there's this very high level of structure. I used to have this argument a lot with Dave Holland when I first started playing with him.

**J.V.:** That must have been somewhere around 1980.

**S.C.:** After he played with Sam Rivers and Circle, yes. I started talking to him about doing something in about '78 or '79, but we didn't actually get together until about '81. When we started playing together we had these different ideas about what we liked. We would sit down and listen to records. Of course, we had differences. They were sometimes just a matter of taste, many times cultural differences, you know, he grew up in England and I grew up in Chicago. But there were a lot of other things that were obviously common, otherwise we would not have sat down and talked. Okay, so when it comes to making music, he's telling me why he wants to play with me, I'm telling him why I might be interested in playing with him, you know. One of the biggest differences, to put it that way, was our idea about structure. For him, like I say, he just came out of this free-form and he found it really enjoyable to not give any parameters at all. And I said, "Well, Dave, when you don't give any parameters, that's like giving parameters." And he said, "Well, what do you mean by that? I have the freedom to play what I want!" I said, "If you give somebody the freedom to play what they want they will tend to do the same thing over and over." He didn't buy this, in the beginning. I said, "Let somebody do whatever they want over and over, I mean complete freedom, and they will fall into habits and will do the same thing over and over." Actual freedom to me is choices.

**J.V.:** That's a pretty restrictive idea of freedom, considering that it's not you who will decide what you can choose from.

**S.C.:** First of all, there is no such thing as freedom. We're human beings, we're creatures of habit. But if we have more choices, the illusion of freedom is greater than if we have less choice. The average musician, if you tell him to do what he wants, or she wants, they're not going to develop certain skills because they will just fall into what's easiest for them to do. If you force them out of certain habits, they will be forced to develop certain skills to deal with those things. So we had this argument over and over and over. The argument was really solved by the music itself. Because after we started playing – his approach was to write open tunes and my approach was write tunes with these varying structures, and there was also Kenny Wheeler who wrote mostly from a harmonic standpoint – the music that people heard was a combination of all these approaches. It wasn't one approach. Eventually, these things started influencing each other and sort of coming together. I saw some points in what he said, and he saw some points in what I said, and so the character of the group was formed. Eventually he ended up doing music almost all of which had some kind of structure, as you can see from his music today. His music started to have more and more structures, he really got into rhythms, because this is what I was into. At the same time, I felt certain advantages of what he was doing and the language that he was dealing with. But actually the language that he was dealing with, I looked at it more as the people who he was influenced by, people like Sam Rivers, who I also played with. It was Sam Rivers who really had this strong open thing happening. But what I discovered was that the people

who really played open the best knew structure. I guess what I'm saying about structure is that the structure itself is an influencing factor which you are forced to deal with when you impose it as an organizational factor.

**J.V.:** You mean like a liberating constraint?

**S.C.:** Yeah, but "liberating" is misleading. We're never going to be free. Forget that. But the thing about structure is that you don't get fooled thinking that you're doing whatever you want to do. To me, Coltrane's life is the perfect example of that. He used structure to get to a variety. The word I would prefer to use is not freedom but variety. So you can see that he was playing a certain way and he stumbled on certain kinds of structural things around the time he was doing that *Giant Steps* stuff, which he felt he needed to investigate. He definitely investigated them to a ridiculous degree. He did it on standards, he did it on originals. He got a lot of response from that. A lot of response from inside the music community itself. Even from the musicians in his band. Some people were saying, "man, why do we have to play all these chords?" Other people outside the group were saying, "well, you know, that's kind of stiff, playing all these chords." And other people dug it. He gave an interview where he said he was talking to Ornette Coleman. And Ornette Coleman said to him, "if you want to play all these chords, go ahead, but why do you have to impose that on the rhythm section?" And so he thought about that.

**J.V.:** At the same time, he's playing in Miles Davis's group.

**S.C.:** Exactly, where Miles is going in the opposite direction, dealing with, what I would call, color music. That makes more sense from Miles's perspective because Miles was never a really technical kind of player anyhow, he was always kind of a color player, more like Lester Young, even when he was playing Bird's music and he was playing "Rhythm Changes" or whatever. So it made sense that he was attracted to that kind of thing, so-called modal music. And with Trane, you could see how both of these things came together. He said, okay, with the band, they don't necessarily have to play all these structures. But he kept doing it. And he got freer and freer, and more and more fluent in doing it. If somebody is playing an open fifth, for example, and against that you're running all these structures, well, the structures are not exactly set now. In other words, it's not an A-A-B-A thing, it's not a thing that's exactly set.

**J.V.:** You mean because it's based on a mode?

**S.C.:** He would be doing that not only on the so-called modal material, but also on the standards. There are a lot of examples of him playing with Miles's band where they were playing rhythm changes. He'll get to the bridge, and he runs these structures every which way but backwards. It's almost like, I say we're going to the store, you and me walking to the store, and you say, "you know what, I've got to do something first, I'll meet you at the store." So I go off and do a couple of things, but by the time you get to the store I'll be there. Or I'll arrive a minute after you, or something like that. So I've taken an alternate path to the store, but my intention is still to meet you at the store. So melodically and harmonically that's basically what Trane was doing. He knew where the rhythm changes were going, of course he had been playing rhythm changes all his life. He knew exactly what was happening, so he would get to the bridge and he would start going off on these alternate paths. And where most musicians would be substituting one chord, or two chords, he would substitute a whole path of chords. It's sort of a, "I'll meet you at the store"-kind of thing. And by the time that Jimmy Cobb and Wynton Kelly, and all those guys got to the store, Trane was there. So, these things got longer and longer, because the structures themselves created paths. It's almost like he'd built his own road, but it's still structure. It's just that the structure has become very malleable. He could mold it, sort of spontaneously, as he was going along. This was the kind of thing that I was really interested in with this music.

**J.V.:** So I take it for you there is no open form at all.

**S.C.:** Not for me. When Dave told me, this song is open, I really never played open. What I was doing was spontaneously constructing paths, as opposed to playing open. It's almost like this conversation that we're having. I don't know exactly what I'm going to say. So I'm sort of spontaneously constructing the path, but there are elements in the language that allow me to do that. These structures are very important to me, because they represent, in a sense, ideas.

**J.V.:** Here it is again. All this time we've been talking about structure we've been talking about the language metaphor. And if I understand you correctly, you don't understand structure or language as something purely functional in terms of facilitating communication. In order for them to represent ideas their form seems to matter.

**S.C.:** Of course. These structures are very important, they're not just technical things for me. They have a lot to do with, in the end, a vibration that you're trying to put out, which I think is the most important thing. Musicians, like architects, or anybody else, have to learn the language in music, the craft. You have to deal with that whether you're going to play Kenny G's music or my music. But this thing that I'm talking about now is to me where the creativity comes in. What kinds of paths,

what kinds of spontaneous structures – since we're dealing with improvisation – are you going to deal with? And what kind of parameters do you put on yourself?

**J.V.:** What you described as Dave Holland's initial attitude is typical I think for what a lot of European jazz musicians of the late sixties and seventies thought. Many of them embraced free jazz not because they were interested in structure but because they felt that free jazz allowed them to get away from clichés, things that were over-done and over-used. For a lot of them the aim was to produce something that was not another imitation of American jazz, but rather original and authentically European. And this also meant that it had to be new. That's where they saw creativity come in. Of course, this whole approach seems very different from what you just described. I wonder, though, if, hidden somewhere, there are any commonalities between that approach and yours after all?

**S.C.:** Well, to me, 'new' is another one of these illusions, like freedom. There is no new, there is no freedom. My goal is certainly not to create something new. My goal is almost to create something old. This may sound strange, but I mean it maybe in a different way. I'll explain it. The life that we live, the planet that we're living on, is very, very old. I'm not going to come up with something new, outside of what I am, because it doesn't have a whole lot to do with what we are. This goes into what you believe about life and everything, what you believe created everything, or if it was created. But, whether you think things are created by something or not, whatever happened, we can agree that something happened. In other words, some people can say there is a God and God created such-and-such, and they think of God as some old man in the sky with superpowers. Some people think of God as some kind of energy, a living energy that is in everything, in the universe. Some people think there is no God at all, that things just happen accidentally. But, on a cosmic level, it really doesn't matter what your opinion is. What happened, happened. It happened regardless of what you believe. So, if you believe that there is a spirit in the tree that created everything, that's your thing. That doesn't change the fact of where you came from, and the fact of where the tree came from. The only thing that I am fairly sure of is that what created the tree also created me. What created the planet, created me, whatever that was. I can talk about that in broad terms. I myself, as Steve Coleman, as whatever I think I am, had little to do with that. My beliefs go deeper than this, but the general thing is that I believe there is a kind of energy that is a part of all of us, and it gets expressed in an individual way through each of us.

**J.V.:** You mean in a pantheistic kind of way?

**S.C.:** I think of it in terms of energy. What I'm looking for in my music is the sound-expression of that individual way it gets expressed in us, of that individualism. I believe that basically the energy that is in you, and that is within me, that is within everybody else, whether it is a rat or a lion, is the same energy. But it is expressed, it's individualized, in this existence. It's projected into the world in various varieties. Therefore you are not me in that sense. When we talk about culture, and all these questions, they're all local questions. They're all dealing with local situations. But ultimately, these things are cosmic questions. The way this universe is built is ingenious. Things exist to a greater degree than you could ever think, to a greater degree of detail. And at the same time, I believe that the principles that run things on this cosmic level also control things right down to the most microscopic detail. It's infinite, at least from my point of view it seems to be infinite. Infinitely big and infinitely small, and we're somewhere in the middle of that. So we have to deal with our individualism. There is a pattern that makes all humans common, but every human being is different.

**J.V.:** Okay, but aren't these people who want to play something new simply stressing that individualism?

**S.C.:** I don't call my music new because of the individualism. It may be unique, if I think in broad enough sweeps, and in broad enough perspectives, and if I study enough, if I listen more deeply to myself and my inner nature. I think that that's what makes the so-called unique people seem unique. That's mainly a function of not just blindly following a certain thing. Most people don't think about any of these things. They just blindly follow. They live their lives according to whatever parameters are set out for them at any given time. In other words, they're robots, to put it coldly.

**J.V.:** Quite coldly, yes.

**S.C.:** But it's true, most people *are* robots. And some people step a little bit outside of that. They work on building skills that express that. Others just simply rebel. I can rebel against everything. I could just say, "I don't dig shit." I don't necessarily develop a set of skills that expresses it, I'm just antisocial. Or I could develop negative skills and go around blowing shit up, and say, "well that's my way of expressing myself." But I choose to express myself in a creative way that leads to, what I refer to as, a positive direction, in terms of expanding awareness. I don't choose to blow things up, or to go around killing people, destroying things. That's not my way of trying to contribute to change for a positive direction, because that just leads to more destruction. So, instead of going to war with Iraq, or something, I choose to deal with music. And I choose to deal with music that has an expanding nature.

**J.V.:** That turns music and art into quite a moralistic affair, doesn't it?



**S.C.:** The point is not whether it's moralistic or not. The point is: You have a choice. Sonny Rollins told me recently that there are two kinds of music, that which contracts and that which expands. I basically agree with this. I choose to deal with music of this expanding nature. This is my ultimate concern about structure. I mean, before we were talking about my local concern as a musician, what I'm interested in. But my ultimate concern is to deal with things that will facilitate expanding awareness. I try to deal with music that ultimately has an expanding vibrational effect.

**J.V.:** Now, your structures are of course extremely complex. Does the listener have to have some kind of understanding of those structures to have such an "expanding vibrational effect?"

**S.C.:** No, it's not important to me at all that people understand the structures or anything I'm doing musically. In fact, that usually gets in the way. Sometimes I go to Europe and people say, "I don't understand your music." Understanding is not part of it. You'll never understand it like me, and that's not important. It's not even a big deal. I'll never understand it like you. The point is that some music makes you reflect, it makes you think about the nature of things, because that's the nature of the sound. The sounds are put together in such a way that they have a kind of expanding effect.

**J.V.:** An "expanding effect," what does that actually mean? Do we become better people by listening to a certain kind of music?

**S.C.:** I wouldn't say "better people." But I know people who listen to that kind of music, they ended up reading more, they ended up checking out different things, different cultures, all kinds of stuff. And music draws them to, well, it brings out those kinds of tendencies that maybe are already there, they're latent tendencies. I know for certain Coltrane's music had this effect on me when I was younger, and it still does. Other music closes you down. There is no doubt about that. There is no doubt that people who listen over and over to certain kinds of music become closed to ideas, become closed to even thinking about shit. There are people who deliberately use this. There are certain kinds of music playing in a shopping mall, on purpose. It's not just, we're going to put on any music. You're not going to come in and hear Coltrane's *Ascension*. They play certain things because they have all these musical psychologists, who are trying to get you into what they think of as a relaxed mode, but what they really mean is a relaxed robotic mode.

**J.V.:** I think most musicians would subscribe to what you're saying about breaking out of the robotic mode. They're all taught, don't repeat yourself, get out of your routine. And yet you seem to be saying that this is not yet "expanding awareness."

**S.C.:** Exactly. You can have that kind of viewpoint that you are describing right now within many different directions. Generally speaking, most musicians will say what you just said. Even the ones who I think are repeating would still say that. From their standpoint they may not be repeating, because there are a lot of ways to repeat yourself. What I try to do is to always learn new ways of doing things and internalize that. I think that the growth of my music will take care of itself if I keep moving in that general direction. In other words, there are certain things that are big concerns that I can't really control consciously. But the logic is that if I keep learning new things, keep learning new ways of doing things, and actually internalize that to the point where it becomes habit, to the point where I'm not thinking about it anymore, it will affect my music in some way, depending on which things I'm studying and why I'm studying them. And then there is the creative mode you're in at any particular given moment, while you're actually performing. Some days you are more creative than others. Some days you are able to flow and connect with everything, other days you're not, and that's all part of it.

**J.V.:** So it's really an idea of growth versus stagnation.

**S.C.:** Exactly. But the point is, this growth is happening on microscopic levels. There's a lot of what I call microstructure. And this is something that a lot of people have in common today. This is one of the things that you don't escape. You can deny it, but I don't choose to deny these things. I just internalize them and say, "okay, let's look at some other things." And all these little things, these little microstructures, you have a choice of adding different microstructures to your repertoire and letting them affect your music, or just going with the same ones. Unfortunately, most people's additions of microstructures, and how they look at microstructure in the first place, are rather limited. For example, if I just look at it tonally, then that's going to be limited, [if] I don't look at rhythm at all, I just look at tone. Most people only have a theory of music dealing with tone material, they don't usually have a melodic thing, structural thing, or rhythmic thing. But as you add these things to your repertoire, so to speak, they begin to affect your music in terms of the choices you make, because it's like adding to the language. In this case, I'm using language as – I'm talking about structure, because ultimately the difference between German and English is what? In other words, you can have the same thought and I could have the same thought, even if you speak only German and I speak only English. The thought is going to be affected by culture, as it always is, it's going to be affected even by language, because language and culture, you can't separate them. However, vibrationally it can be essentially the same thought, expressed in different ways.

**J.V.:** Is it really essentially the same thought, though?

**S.C.:** Yes, I mean there are commonalities. Nobody has exactly the same thought, not even two people of the same culture. But we communicate in the areas that we have in common. You have to have something that draws you together, that gives you a base upon which to build. Music is that base. I've played with people who I can't talk to.

**J.V.:** The projects that I know, like your collaboration with AfroCuba de Matanzas, are quite close to you culturally and musically speaking. Have you played with people from cultures completely different from your own? Did music still work as a base then?

**S.C.:** What do you mean by completely different? I've played with musicians in Africa, I've played with musicians in Brazil, I've played with musicians in different places that I couldn't talk to. But I couldn't say that we didn't have anything in common culturally. Even, if nothing else, the desire to play with each other is also a connection.

**J.V.:** I agree, cultures aren't completely different, but some overlap more than others. And I wonder how and if musical communication works if you in fact have very, very little in common.

**S.C.:** I went to the south of India and I played with this *mridangam* player; this guy was a top Indian drummer. Now, the whole tonal part of my language didn't really relate to this guy. I mean, he didn't relate to it. If he did relate to it, he certainly didn't have the same base that I had. The basis on which we communicated was mainly rhythm. I say mainly, because there were some adjustments that I made melodically to him and I'm sure there were some adjustments that he made. And I played with south Indian singers, Carnatic singers. What was interesting is that one of the girls who I played with asked me about progression and the variety of sounds that I was getting. It's even hard to describe this in language, because – she spoke English, that wasn't the problem – but she just didn't have it in her music vocabulary to ask these questions. She was wondering what kind of decisions I made, because she mainly sang in one raga, and she heard me kind of going all over the place. And she was like, "well, I know there is something there that you're following, but what is it, what are you doing?" And I said, "that's not a simple question I can answer." Because we didn't have the common language for me to answer the question. If you're a classical musician, there is something there that I can use as a bridge to build between where you are and where I am.

**J.V.:** There are certain musical concepts that are pretty much universal. How much does that help as a cornerstone?

**S.C.:** First of all, many concepts that people believe to be universal, like the tonic, are not universal, and they have not always been there. Things are always in a state of change, a state of flux. Unfortunately sometimes the change is so gradual that you don't see it in your lifetime. If you study ancient Greek music, for example, they didn't have any concept of what we call a tonic. But there is some kind of concept of gravity in the music, an attraction, a structure and all this. There is always that, because this is something that exists outside of human beings, this is outside of our decision process. It's transferred over to us, you could say. So when I think about music, I try more and more to think in this universal way about the music, and less and less in a local kind of way. That enables me to deal with other cultures. I don't have a problem playing with anybody, from any culture, except when they... well, I guess it depends on the frame of mind I'm in. I can have problems playing with someone from right here if they're in a certain mindset. In other words, some people believe in playing bebop, and when you play bebop you have to do this and this. I don't have a good time playing with those kinds of people. Or there are people who hired me for pop records in the past, for example, and then they start telling me how to play. Well, that's not my cup of tea. Can you make it more like Kenny G., man? You know, that kind of thing. That's not really my cup of tea.

**J.V.:** Seriously, Steve, has that really ever happened? I mean, sure, many record companies are just after the money and don't respect the artists. But a record producer asking Steve Coleman to sound like Kenny G., that sounds like a caricature.

**S.C.:** Yeah sure, it happens a lot. It happens when you put yourself in that situation, let's put it that way. And the thing is, you don't even know what to say to a person like that, because when they say that, that automatically tells you that you're on such a different wavelength, you're in such a different place than them, that it's almost like you have nothing in common. I had the same conversation with Sonny Rollins.

**J.V.:** They want him to sound like Kenny G., too?

**S.C.:** No, but he tells me about things that people say all the time. And they have no idea who he is and how long he's been doing what he's doing. You get on an airplane, for instance, and the stewardess goes, "Are you a musician? I love music. What kind of music do you play?" Who this person is and what kind of experience they have determines the level the conversation is going to be on. I try to make it a point to maybe introduce some new ideas to some people, or to get

introduced to new ideas myself. When I'm discussing anything with anybody, whether I know them or not, I try to make learning a part of the experience. Whether I'm introducing them to some new ideas, or they're introducing me.

**J.V.:** Do you teach your audience, too?

**S.C.:** Well, I don't teach them, but I'd say you have to be sensible, especially as a player. I have to think about my music in ways that are going to make it digestible, let's put it that way. People who come to concerts, there are all kinds of people there. I'm playing the concert for myself and for all those people. I try, in my concerts, to think of it as a collective experience. Yes, we're making the sounds on stage, but I like to think of it as a communion. Everyone is not communing on the same level, of course not, but the point is that our spirits resonate. That is my concept of a concert. You can't possibly know what's going on in the different people's heads. I don't want to know. Impossible. Everybody comes into it with their own experience. But the thing that we all have in common is spirit, so that's the thing that is most important to me: What effects does sound have on spirit?

**J.V.:** When the audience reacts to your playing in a certain way, that in turn might affect your playing. Does that happen on a more general spiritual level, or does it go all the way to very detailed, precise musical things?

**S.C.:** It goes to all levels. But you have to be careful not to let it affect you on a – how can I say this – on a superficial level. We have a term that we call "getting house." For me it's a negative thing. It's kind of an entertainment thing where you go for a certain effect – and all musicians know how to do this on some level, but some musicians play on it more than others. People are fairly gullible. For example, there are certain things that a saxophone player does, like circular breathing – this is what Kenny G. is good at – and you hold this note for a long time and eventually there will be some people in the audience who'll go, wow, that's incredible. And they'll start screaming and everything, and they think this is really a big deal that you can hold this one note a really long time. It's a trick, in a sense. There are lots of these kinds of tricks, individually and group-wise. I don't like that kind of shit. It's really simplistic and it's really easy to manipulate the audience on that level. But it can make you a lot of money, if you take it to the extreme. In effect, that's what popular music does. It plays off of those simplistic things that get certain reactions from people. It's like singers who sing songs about love. That is something that is always going to get over, especially with people who are dealing with life on a very mundane level. Because money and love are two things that people are always going to relate to. Or sex, let's put it that way. And so if you hit them there, on that level that they are dealing with every day, you are going to have a very big audience.

**J.V.:** Ironically, that's one way of building upon the universal.

**S.C.:** Yes, it doesn't matter whether you come from Russia, or from Germany, or from China, or wherever, these are things that today you have to deal with. You're going to deal with sex on some kind of level, because you're human. So these are very mundane things. Now, if you're dealing with higher concerns – higher is really not the word, other concerns, spiritual concerns – your music is not going to be really, really popular. I've been in the studio with people who are sitting there, trying to figure out how they are going to sell the most records possible while they're making their music. I don't choose to put myself around it a lot, because I think if you're around this stuff too much it starts influencing you. But that's what people do.

**J.V.:** Isn't that an unfair treatment of popular music? A lot of it, in its accessibility, will be extremely meaningful to very many people, and I'm not sure whether that meaning doesn't carry over into that more spiritual realm.

**S.C.:** I understand what you're talking about. We're talking in broad sweeps here. Of course there are all kinds of levels, not just the extreme levels. Everybody has to choose their poison, so to speak, choose which way they're going to fall. Myself, I do care about the audience, and what they are thinking, but I think more on this communion level. And I think less on the entertainment level, with me dancing across the stage doing splits, like Prince, or whatever.

**J.V.:** What about someone like James Brown? I thought that Maceo Parker, his alto player, was one of your early influences.

**S.C.:** I've always liked James Brown. It's not that I don't care for any of the people who think on an entertainment level. First of all, you can't do everything. If you try to do everything your shit just ends up being weak because you didn't make a choice. The music I like is music that definitely has a character and people have made definite choices. When I feel like listening to Beethoven – or the shadow of Beethoven, I call it, people who are playing Beethoven today – the music is so great that even the shadow is great. That's the way I look at it. So, if I'm in the mood to listen to that, I'll put on that. If I'm in the mood for Public Enemy, I'll put on that. I don't think that they're the same thing, but in the end you have music with people expressing themselves and you have music that you're doing for another reason. Some people play music to get girls, some people play music to get money. There are all kinds of reasons to play music. So sometimes when people play music just to get girls or just to get money, I can hear this in the music and I usually don't like it. But sometimes that can be

mixed in with other reasons, as you say. It depends on the mixture, I guess. But see, when I listen to Bartók's music, for example, I hardly feel the monetary thing at all in the music.

**J.V.:** Some musicians make the somewhat elitist argument that the higher realm will by necessity be less popular than the more mundane because the higher realm consists of breaking established molds. That's pretty much what I meant earlier with the stance of the European free jazzers. But then that's not what you're saying. Your distinction of high and mundane has nothing to do with the modernist idea to break internalized habits and instead work from an intentional level. But how exactly do you balance the two, that is, habit and intention?

**S.C.:** A large part of improvising is learned responses, you could say reflexes. You internalize things to the point where it's reflex. Otherwise it's not going to be on a high level, I can tell you that right now. You have to have this language of reflexes, basically things that you respond on, which means that you have to be playing for a certain number of years. You have to internalize certain principles, to the point where things become reaction. In that sense, it's no different than learning martial arts, learning basketball, or learning any other skill. On top of that there's intention, all these things that we've been talking about before, what you intend to do, which areas you're moving in. What to me is most important is your repertoire of responses and how you intend them to work within your music. A lot of that is based on what has already been developed in your time. In other words, Charlie Parker would have never played the way he played without what happened twenty years before he played. He would never have developed those kinds of responses. He developed those things from listening to the guys he listened to, Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, and following Don Byas around and Art Tatum and all these people. A certain tradition was already there and he was building on that. It's no different than what Isaac Newton did when he was building on Kepler and Copernicus and Galileo. And Einstein built on what Newton did. It's the same thing. So we have this collective knowledge that's being passed along by humanity and it gets culturalized and vocalized in certain places and then you're born in that situation. If you don't learn those things then you won't be much of an improviser, or much of anything, blacksmith, theorist, physicist, whatever you are.

**J.V.:** If we're so indebted to our precursors, it still is our job to make those people our precursors. But to do that there seems to be more involved than just studying their music and, through endless repetition, internalizing it.

**S.C.:** That's why, when I study musicians, I try to study their circumstance, what they learned and how. What's really important to me is the process, how they learned what they learned. I mean the process that they went through. Because this process internalizes things. Going through something, experiencing it, that's what makes it more deeply internalized. It's not just about what books you read, or what theory you think you want to learn. It's the process of experiencing it.

**J.V.:** People in the humanities talk a lot about embodied experience these days. But there is a certain uneasiness about that. What if bodily internalization means your own voluntary subjection? So then some writers start arguing that classical music is "bad" because it makes you internalize a "proper technique," which is another way of saying that you'll become a robot, whereas improvisation is somehow "good" because there is no "proper technique," and so you break out of the forces that supposedly control and shape our body. And now you're suggesting that the improviser isn't in control of his reflexes once he has decided which reflexes he wants to internalize.

**S.C.:** It's true, for the majority of it you're not in control. Things are happening very fast. If I'm thinking about the elements of music while I'm playing, I'm not playing too well. Occasionally musical thoughts do come, but basically I'm thinking more on a metaphor kind of level. And the elements of music that I find difficult will enter my mind when those difficulties have to be dealt with. There may be moments that you're lost, there may be certain tonal combinations that are difficult, and when you get to those passages you may have to focus more on that. But overall I would say that most of those things are internalized, and if they're not you try to get them to the internalized point. So your mind can be concerned with what I call higher issues, a higher hierarchy of issues. Like I talk about vibration a lot. Sound is the medium that I'm working with, but what I'm trying to say is a different thing than sound or language. It's... the closest I can say is vibration, it's an idea about something, not physical vibration so much as the idea of what I'm trying to communicate or speak about.

**J.V.:** I have to say, this surprises me. You're disconnecting the idea from the sound, and to describe it you use "vibration," which is such a bodily concept. I always felt that improvisation is one of those things where mind and body are really so closely connected.

**S.C.:** You have vibrations on a lot of different levels. If I just play one tone, then we can talk about vibration in different terms of that tone. If I play two tones, we can talk about the relationship of the vibrations between those two tones. This goes all the way up to the level that I was just talking about. In order to successfully have the vibration on that last level, the higher level, you need to know about the vibration on the other levels. Because it's all connected, like you just said. It's all connected right down to the things that you were talking about, vibration of the body, vibration of the instrument, vibration of the room, any kind of vibration on any kind of level that you can think about, all the way to spiritual vibration. So, if you want

to have control and understanding about your ultimate thing that you're trying to communicate, then you have to understand everything right from the initial sound thing.

**J.V.:** Now, if vibration is a kind of language that is more basic and also more encompassing than verbal language, the problem is: How do you explain vibration in verbal language, for instance in teaching?

**S.C.:** It takes years to explain those vibrational things in verbal language. And it still might not work. One time I asked Von Freeman about his voice-leading in harmony, he's the master of that shit. I asked him, "How did you learn that shit? You're so fluent at it." And he said, "Well, you know, I sat down one day and I said, let me look at this thing." He said, "I began with one tone. I studied one tone. And I studied all that I could study about one tone." When these old guys talk, you don't ask too many questions. You pretty much just listen to what they say. And so, I didn't know what he meant, but I just listened. And he said, "I worked on that for a long time, you know, for months. Just seeing what could be done with one tone. When I felt pretty good about that, I moved on to two tones. That was a bit harder. I worked a lot longer, but I worked and saw all that I could do with two tones. Then I moved to three tones, and so on. After I went on for a while I realized that you can pretty much do everything that you need to do with two tones." That's what he told me. I spent years thinking about this shit. Years. I'm still thinking about it, you know. I feel like I have a better handle on knowing what he meant now than then, although it is not a simple thing to explain. And when I tell the story to somebody playing in my group or something, and they ask me, "What did he mean?" it takes me literally years to explain what I think he means. And I'm sure I only have part of what he means. What it means to me. Some things, you have to explain them with a million examples over a period of time. The meaning dawns on a person and when they have to explain it it's funny. We live in this McDonald's type society where everybody thinks everything is just quick. It's not like that. You have to actually build the understanding, slowly over time. So this thing that Von Freeman explained to me, it sounds like a very simple thing, but it really doesn't make any sense at all without the experience. It's maybe fifteen years ago that he told me, and I found it to be absolutely true. I could never explain it in one day, or in a lecture over an hour.

**J.V.:** Charlie Parker said you can't talk about music in words...

**S.C.:** ...and that's true. But on another level, that's for us musicians to deal with, those particular issues. But that stuff gets transferred to other people on another vibration level. That's what I mean when I say that there are these different levels of vibration. It gets transferred to the audience on another level of vibration. They never deal with that level, they never have to. Basically to me music is a medium. A musician has to be an architect. He has to understand that medium and how to work with it.

**J.V.:** But why does the audience feel any vibration at all, apart from the obvious fact that rhythms and grooves are somehow infectious?

**S.C.:** Because they're being influenced by the same vibrations that I'm being influenced by. That's what you hear when you hear a group together. You don't hear four or five people who understand the same thing, they never understand the same thing. But there's a sort of collective vibration that's influencing all of us, the people in the audience, the people on stage, and that's sort of like a blanket of vibration above everybody's individual vibration. It's the connective tissue that connects us in this time. It's an expression of the character of the time through us. It can bring us together. I feel like, when I play music, that's what I'm working with. That's my real raw material. This connective vibration. I've got to figure out how to tap into that and how to amplify that through the sound. This may sound metaphysical, but I really feel like that's what I'm trying to do. I think a good concert is when that happens and everybody goes away with this sort of experience that they can't explain, but they just feel connected, at least for that moment.

**J.V.:** Jazz audiences have changed a lot. Do you think it was easier in the old days to have that vibrational connection when jazz – and I know, you don't use that term, so let's just say, when that idiom was still an important part of black culture?

**S.C.:** There was a different basis. Back in the days when black people were segregated in this country, that experience had more to do with their individual experiences in this country as a race. It had much more to do with that, by force naturally, because you always played for all black people in all black situations. When I was growing up, that was the situation. I had a hard time making the adjustment from playing for all black audiences on the South Side of Chicago, to just playing for audiences. I did, I had a rough time. It started in New York, but when I went to Europe it was a real shock.

**J.V.:** People didn't respond in the way you were used to?

**S.C.:** Yeah, on very simple levels. I was used to people going like, "Hey baby, yeah man, you play that sax." You know, talking at the concert and expressing themselves. I was not used to playing in a concert hall where everybody was totally silent.

**J.V.:** Compared to Europe, I almost always notice a heightened expressiveness of American audiences in general. Even with white audiences.

**S.C.:** You should go to one of these places where it's all black. Because the thing is, when I first came to New York, I didn't play downtown, because I couldn't. Nobody knew me and I didn't know anybody, I wasn't in any band. So, I was playing mostly in Brooklyn and up in Harlem and places like that. Also, I was making a transition myself. I didn't have the money to live in other neighborhoods, but I could have chosen to live in a Hispanic neighborhood, for example. But I didn't. I went where I felt more comfortable. As a result the audiences weren't really that different than what I'd experienced in Chicago. But when I got a gig with Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, and we started traveling and everything, and that band was half white, half black, I started experiencing other things. I started to notice that there were big differences in audiences. And I felt it as a musician.

**J.V.:** Just to come back to what we talked about before, I think this is what Albert Murray has in mind, that whole communal thing, from the perspective of the black community. And so, when he talks about idiomatic authenticity – he doesn't limit it to "black," but that kind of experience is certainly his premise, and probably his utopia as well.

**S.C.:** But why would somebody who is in that situation even think about that? That's where I part with Albert Murray. In other words, this only becomes an issue when you're explaining it to somebody who doesn't understand it, or who's outside that situation. Why would Buddy Guy, or Junior Wells, or Muddy Waters, or B.B. King in that situation even think about that? They're concerned with other issues that are more "inside," to put it that way, than this issue.

**J.V.:** So it's the problem of the field ethnographer who has to create perspectives for his audience that deflect from the perspectives of the people he stays with?

**S.C.:** It's like explaining African music, West-African music. The first people to write about West-African music were Europeans. The Africans themselves, what's the point in them writing about it? They were doing it. As Africans started traveling and being associated with universities and having to teach and everything, it's a weird kind of thing. They were influenced by the western musicologists about writing about their own shit. And you see this with cats like Nketia and Willie Anku and some of these West-African professors who are writing about their own music. You can see the influence. They're structuring things in a certain way, they've learned how to list their references and all this kind of stuff. They can see in another perspective because they are who they are and they can bring this perspective into the writing, but the form in which they write still follows this so-called scholarly form, the European format. And basically their audience is Europeans, or white people here. It's not like Africans are going to pick up their stuff and read it. Not people involved in the process, not somebody in some tribe somewhere. Their subjects, in other words, the people they are writing about are just living that experience and they're not concerned with, as Albert Murray calls it, idiomatic gestures, outside of what is needed and accepted in that situation.

**J.V.:** So when you started playing in Chicago, what were the inside issues?

**S.C.:** When I was growing up and playing in Von Freeman's sessions, there were certain things that were important: Your sound, your groove, and how you express yourself. Albert Murray can interpret this as idiomatic expression, but it really comes down to if you want to work, if you want to sit in. There was always this criticism for not having a sound, not having a good groove, a lot of criticism on rhythm: This cat can't swing, he has no feel, etc. So, it's not an intellectualized thing, it's just a matter of learning this particular idiom from these masters who came before you. You have to get with what it is they're good at expressing. How to make it feel a certain way, how to blend, how to swing. You get cats talking about floating the rhythm, swinging the rhythm, and all these different terms. You've got to get with that. Not as a writer, not in the way of explaining it to somebody, but just to be a participant.

**J.V.:** Most musicians I talked to packaged their story in a basic plot. When they first started out, that's exactly what they had to do, learn the language in order to become an accepted member. But once they had reached that point, they wanted to become more mature artists and try to develop their own thing – so they cared less about idiomatic rules.

**S.C.:** I don't agree with that because I think that even in becoming a so-called mature artist, you're still following norms. It's been demonstrated how to do that. When I talk about creativity, there are certain creative people I bring up all the time. There are certain people who are my yardsticks, my reference. Even for doing that which you just described. There's a tradition of creativity. So those who decide to be creative are influenced by that tradition. They don't just decide because one day they individually decide it. You get the idea from other people who've done it, to even do that in the first place. Everything I'm talking to you about, there have been examples of people who've done it. I know, I've looked at those examples, I've followed those examples, I've studied them. I have my hybrid version of those examples, because I bring it all

together in me and what I like. You have to choose which tradition you're going to follow. So okay, yes you have this thing, like you said, when you first come into this culture and you're trying to be accepted and at some point you decide to, what I call, specialize, or focus on certain elements. But you still have these norms of what people set up before you. I don't like it when people speak of it like they're just making this decision that's totally independent and personal. It's not. It's influenced by things. It may be rare, it may not be where everybody is going, or where most people are going, but nevertheless, there's a lot that's been set up that you wouldn't even think of if these people before you hadn't done it.

**J.V.:** So you mean that the idea of standing out is modeled after those who've stood out in the past?

**S.C.:** Yes, these things have patterns, too. It's all about making a contribution, that's how I look at it. When Charlie Parker did a certain thing with his music, he made a contribution. Which a lot of people use, draw from. A musician can choose to make a contribution in that way. This was a conscious choice of Charlie Parker, or Coltrane for that matter. It wasn't just unconscious. It was the way they felt, but they knew what they were doing. Coltrane and others were well aware that they were in a special fraternity. They even talked about it, about being a part of the creative thing that was happening at that time. So today I can say, "here's my contribution." It's not for me to judge the level of the contribution or what effect it's going to have. That's completely outside of me, beyond my control. The only thing in my control is that I can do the best I can to hook it up as best I can, as we say, and I drop it in the pool, and it does what it does.

**J.V.:** An interesting case in point is Sonny Stitt. He is still considered by some to have been somewhat of an epigone.

**S.C.:** I have kind of a unique relationship with Sonny Stitt. First of all, I knew Sonny Stitt.

**J.V.:** I've heard that you. . .

**S.C.:** ...yes, I followed him around quite a bit. He was probably the first musician on that level that I actually knew, that I had personal contact with. When I say on that level, I consider Sonny Stitt really one of the... one of the cats, as we would say. Speaking of cats like, you know, Sonny Rollins, Coltrane, Bird. To me he was one of those guys. He definitely was in that higher echelon of musicians. He was right there, with everyone, improvising on that same level. When I met him, of course I recognized that, and I knew him from records. Of course I heard the similarities to Parker and all that kind of stuff. To me, especially in that time, that wasn't even what was important. What was important was that he was way up high on this really high level. And I wasn't. He was right there with all these guys in this music from the past, you know, Sonny Stitt was born in 1924, Charlie Parker was born in 1920; that makes them virtually contemporaries. So, that was the first thing, that I used to follow Sonny Stitt around. He was in Chicago so much I thought he lived there. He was traveling a lot because people in Detroit were telling me the same thing. They believed he lived in Detroit. Every time he was in town, I was following him around. I have tons of stories about him, when I was in his hotel room really early in the morning. You know, he was a teacher. Not in the sense of a U.C. Berkeley-type teacher, but he was always telling young guys stories and talking to them about the horn and all kinds of different things. But the main way to learn things from him was by watching him. Of course, there are records, but to me watching him play, the records don't compare to that. I mean, the guy was a really, really accomplished musician.

**J.V.:** Did you get to play with him?

**S.C.:** I played with him a whole bunch of times, yes. Or I can't really say that I played with him because he was on one level and I was on another. But he was the one who first demonstrated to me the things that I needed to get together. There were certain things that he did that were automatic. He could do them in his sleep. Almost. This guy had gotten this part of his playing so together that I knew I had to get this. Later on in life, I became good friends with his daughter. This is relatively recently, like over the last ten years. She had begun to tell me a lot of stories, and I got to tell her stories about him from my perspective. She's almost the same age as me and she was telling me all the stories about growing up and what he did at home and all this kind of stuff. How he used to practice all the time, certain things, you know that filled in certain gaps about my information on him. And then I would tell her what I had learned musically about him. Because she has good ears, but she isn't a musician. Sometimes we would put on records by Sonny Stitt, sometimes we would put on records by Sonny Stitt and Charlie Parker and I would talk about what I thought were the differences and similarities and all this kind of stuff. I can say for sure that he had a big influence on my life. It is through Sonny Stitt that I met Von Freeman. When I first saw Von he was on a double bill with Sonny Stitt. It's a very close relationship to him in terms of him being the professional, or the person on that level, that sort of first tried to open the door for me. Of course, he couldn't do nothing for me in terms of me practicing, I had to that. But he would tell me things.

**J.V.:** Were they easier to comprehend than what Von told you?

**S.C.:** No. If I told you, they wouldn't make a whole lot of sense. He would talk to me like this: "Come here boy, what's a whole note?" And I'd say, "A whole note, uh, a whole note is a note that gets four beats." "No!" Whatever I did say, he would be like, "No!" So finally I said "Okay, what's a whole note?" "It's a circle with a space in it." He would do things like that all the time. The funny thing is that now that I'm older I have exactly the same opinion. Because basically what he is saying is that it's just this notational mark. And that's it. Has nothing to do with music, it's a symbol. That's what he was saying. I thought he was being funny at the time, but in his own way he was saying the same shit that I say today to people. He was very raw in terms of his information. He did tell me that he was good at math and used numbers with music a lot. I could hear that in his playing. By that I mean I could hear the high degree of structure. I could kind of hear the numerical thing. Not in a stiff way but just that he had these relationships together. He was one of the first persons I heard who could play in all the keys really fluently and all that kind of stuff. I saw a lot of incredible things.

**J.V.:** Like what?

**S.C.:** I'll tell you one story I saw with him. There was a saxophone player in Chicago, Guido Sinclair. Normally, local saxophone players, they have certain things they can do really well. But they're not really very broad. I mean, not usually. There's usually a reason why they're local, to put it that way. But this guy had certain keys that he could play in, like really, really fluently. He had these certain little phrases and things like that. He kept his fingers really close to the keys, it looked like his fingers weren't moving. One time I saw him with Stitt. Here the guy was whipping all over the place. Stitt was kind of a gladiator kind of guy. So they were playing, and this guy was whipping all over the place, so Stitt saw what was happening and he analyzed the situation. And the next tune he just called off something that he knew the guy couldn't play on. He didn't even know the guy real good but he could tell, he knew just by listening to the way the guy played that he wouldn't be able to handle this. So he called off a tune which was a normal tune but he started off real quickly in a key that he knew the guy couldn't deal with. The guy fell out of his place, all of a sudden all the speed and everything came to a complete stop. And Stitt was still able to do all the Stitt shit. You know, because he had practiced this stuff. So I was sitting there watching this, watching him kind of deconstruct this guy and thinking at the same time, Okay, I gotta get my keys together. Because, you know, you can't get embarrassed like this. Stitt just tore this guy apart in public. And he looked at that guy, like, Uh huh, where is all that speed now? It was very interesting because I saw how he was a more complete musician. A lot of simple lessons like that, but they stayed with me for a long time. They were craft things. Like high up in the craft of music. So to me, Sonny Stitt was a fantastic musician who drew from his time and played in the idiom of his time. And he was one of the better ones at it, playing with the material that was available at that time. It was a new language when he came up and he got with this new language really fast and he was one of the people who showed how to express himself in this new language. In other words, he contributed to it. And when Bird talked about him, Bird said that Sonny Stitt was a fantastic musician. That's all he had to say. I mean, Sonny Stitt, Charlie Parker, Don Byas, these were the guys and they were all fantastic. Fantastic musicians. I think it is the press that takes someone like Charlie Parker and they make him the leader of what they perceive as a movement. And they always do this.

**J.V.:** They did it with you.

**S.C.:** They did this with me with the M-Base thing. They always do this kind of thing, and it's not true. Charlie Parker moved to New York and when people asked him, "Well, why did you move to New York?" he said, "There were some very advanced things happening in New York and I wanted to be around that, wanted to be a part of that." That tells the story, to me. It's all a big language, but it's not about any one guy, with the flag leading the way. They are all making a contribution and what I have to say about Sonny Stitt is that he was one of the guys who made such a contribution, whether critics recognize the contribution or anyone recognizes the contribution, because a lot of people don't recognize it.

**J.V.:** From what you're saying, it's not only a language-pool that you drop your contribution into and then the pool is open for anyone to just jump into and you'll come out as an improviser. It seems that for the language acquisition you need deep personal linkages.

**S.C.:** Yes, and you see, the connection goes on, it's like a chain. Sonny Stitt, Von Freeman, these guys were my connection to that time. Because I knew them personally. And they made records that make a lot more sense to me through the fact that I knew them. What I got from Sonny Stitt and from Von Freeman, somebody else may try to get from me. For Jonathan [Finlayson, the trumpet player currently playing in Steve's band], I may be the connection. It gets passed down. But it changes, of course. It doesn't get passed down just like that.

**J.V.:** What gets passed down seems to be something more than a contribution of sound. What is it that's not on the records, or that you only hear on the records if you have that connection?

**S.C.:** I'll give you one example. One time I went to Stitt's hotel room and I had my saxophone with me. The guy just woke up. He had been drinking all this vodka so he had bad breath and everything. He said, "Give me your horn, boy!" And I thought, Oh, oh. Is this guy going to blow my horn? So he took my horn, which was a student horn with a student mouthpiece with a,



what we call, stock reed, which is just any old reed. I was pretty poor, so it wasn't anything special. But he took my horn and started playing it. And he sounded *exactly* like Sonny Stitt. He started playing a song, he didn't play any of the original melody but I knew which song he was playing; you could hear the whole rhythm section and everything. My father used to say the guys sounded like they had a drum in the horn, they had such strong time. Everything was there, and this cat had just woken up. Just from that I learned so much, just sitting there listening to him. I said, "Okay, first of all it's not the horn." You know, when he gave back the horn to me, it became nothing again. Piano, saxophone, synthesizer, take your choice, a guy who plays with me now, Grégoire Maret, plays harmonica. Harmonica! It's not the instrument. When people make excuses about the instrument, I'm like, you're just trippin', it has nothing to do with the instrument. It's all in the person. Second of all, you could hear the whole band when Stitt was playing. He was playing these melodic lines but you could hear everything. You could hear the chords, you could hear the rhythm, you could hear what the song was without him playing the melody. I mean he was really, really solid and really, really strong. And that had nothing to do with style. It's a certain assurance. That's where I imagine Bird was, where Bach was, all these cats, they were that solid.

**J.V.:** The importance of the personal connection is intriguing to me. Because that could lead back to verbal language as an extension of gesture, as you put it. So that what the student picks up from a cat like Stitt is not only what it means to be solid as a player. But in having a strong personal link, what gets transmitted is something like a whole way of life.

**S.C.:** I'll tell you about a two-hour phone-conversation I had with Sonny Rollins not so long ago. He didn't actually talk about music that much. He's really into the environment right now. Still, I connect everything that somebody says to who they are and everything they play to who they are. So, for me just talking to him was like talking to him about music. In fact, it was like listening to him play. I don't know how to describe that, because these guys speak in a certain manner, and that manner is in their playing and who they are. It's just one way of being. It's different than a philosopher, because – like I said – philosophers think about things in terms of the theory of it. And that's great, you've got some great theoreticians. But the theory of something and the doing of it is a different thing.

**J.V.:** I notice how you keep coming back to that...

**S.C.:** I learned from my experience at Berkeley, looking at the faculty there, that when you have people who are talking about these things but don't play, or can't play well, shit just heaps up pretty fast. I'm looking at things that are practically useful to me and that can be actually demonstrated in music. There are a lot of people who are writing who are musicians now, and that's good, that's a good trend. As I said earlier, there's a tradition about thinking about music that cares very little for the actual music, and that tradition goes way back. There were a lot of musicians in ancient Greek times who were into the theories of stuff and some of them didn't even respect musicians. They thought that the playing of music was irrelevant. The point was thinking about it in this cosmic way, dealing with numerical proportions and all this kind of stuff. But then you had this one person whose writings we have, his name is Aristoxenus. He was a student of Aristotle, who was a student of Plato. He was in Aristotle's academy and when Aristotle died, Aristoxenus thought that he should have become the leader of the academy. Anyway, this guy was one of the guys who went completely against the tradition the other philosophers were talking about. He thought that what was important was not the theory of the thing and its connection to numbers and science. He said, what is important is the sound and the music itself and the ear should be the only judge of that. He was so diligent in his examination of the stuff according to sound that he started a whole school of thinking. So now there are two schools, the Pythagorean way of thinking and then there is Aristoxenus. I actually find value in both ways, but being a musician, I can particularly relate to what Aristoxenus was talking about. For me, if it's not demonstrated in the actual practical situation it has less merit to me. Just pure theory, that's not good enough for me.

**J.V.:** Because it leaves out the experience?

**S.C.:** Yes, it's all about experience. And your level of experience makes a difference in what you're going to talk about. When you have a person like [Jascha] Heifetz, or [Vladimir] Horowitz, they're talking from a certain level of experience. They're dealing with a different thing than somebody who just got through graduate school. I'm not saying that everything that these guys are saying is correct, but it's certainly based on a large amount of experience. If Sonny Rollins says something to me about improvisation I'm going to listen, because this cat's been there. I was saying the same thing about Sonny Stitt. I hung on every word he said. He says some shit, I listen to him. And in our field, you have people who try to become musicians, people like Stanley Crouch, Peter Watrous, these people have tried to become musicians and didn't make it. And then they started writing and telling everybody else who's playing and who's not. If you yourself couldn't get to a level where you could play well, then maybe you don't really know about playing that much. It's not just about talent, it's about perspectives, too. A guy who couldn't swing himself telling you now who swings and who doesn't, there's something wrong with that.

**J.V.:** Do you feel your music has ever been done justice to by a critic?

**S.C.:** The dangerous thing is they actually try to talk music, these guys. You'd be better off not trying to talk music at all and just talking about the way it makes you feel. I've never seen one review about my music that talks about anything that was really happening, when they try to talk about it technically. Not one.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Joyce Verlinden for her help in finishing up the tape transcription.

### Works Cited

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