Interview Jardins Efémeros, 12 July 2017

Viseu, Portugal. Off the Wire Space
Evan Parker in discussion with Franziska Schroeder

Franziska:

Let's get started. So, it's not going to be that formal but I have prepared a nice introduction and there's a reason for this. I guess we're being filmed, but also a few weeks ago I was at a conference in Belfast and the speaker was presented in a very strange way as if everybody had to know who the person was and I felt really left out because the speaker said " oh she is so amazing and all the things she has done", and I kept thinking what has she done and who is this person?. So, I'm not assuming the same about people knowing or not knowing Evan but I thought it would be really appropriate to introduce Evan with a little biography. Evan can of course keep me right, and I wanted to start with a nice quote from the Parliamentary Jazz Awards four years ago which I love, because it says: “Parker has been rewriting the book on the sounds that can be made with a saxophone for […] half a century, developing a remarkable post-Coltrane technique that has allowed him to play counterpoint on what was designed as a single-line instrument, generate electronics-like textures acoustically, and build a personal soundscape that avoids conventional tunes but has its own arresting lyricism.”

I think it's fair to say that Evan has appeared on over 200 recordings on labels as wide as ECM, Emanem, Incus, and he founded his own label, Psi in 2001. What I like about your history, Evan, is that (you) intended to study Botany, but decided for the saxophone - as you do, and Evan was saying he had listened to Cecil Taylor at the time that record with Jimmy Lyons and Sunny Murray and he changed his mind and thought that free jazz was a better way to go!

Evan, at the time in the 1960s, when he started playing, he was very influenced by Coltrane, which I believe, was also your reason for changing from Alto to Tenor and soprano saxophone? Evan at some point said that Coltrane "influenced my choice of everything". Maybe that has changed - who knows?

The really important encounter in 1966 when Evan moved to London, where he was a frequent visitor to the Little Theatre Club (which was at the time at the center of the emerging free jazz scene in London) was when he was invited them by John Stevens - and I will come back to John Stevens because of his Spontaneous Music Ensemble, SME. If you haven't heard about this, it is a really great ensemble that was operating in the 60s, SME, and Evan recorded with SME in 68 - the first album “Karyobin” - and that was yourself, Derek Bailey, Dave Holland and Kenny Wheeler.

Evan then went on to form the Music Improvisation Company in the 1970s and co-founded INCUS records with his long-standing partner and guitarist Derek Bailey. It was also during that time he was introduced to the German scene by bassist Peter Kowald when he was introduced to Peter Brötzmann. He started to play with Peter Brötzmann in 68 on the Machine Gun recording, and later met Alex von Schlippenbach and percussionist Paul Lovens.

There were other links in the Dutch scene with (rest in peace) Misha Mengelberg who we lost sadly last year, and Han Bennink.

And I think some of the inspiring work - I mean Evan has done lots of inspiring work - was playing in larger groups in the 70s: in Schlippenbach's Globe Unity Orchestra, but also in the Brotherhood of Breath, Barry Guy's London Jazz Composers Orchestra (LJCO).

Evan in the 1980s formed his own Trio with Barry Guy and Paul Lytton, and I think it is probably fair to say that by the end of the 1980s you had probably played in most of the European cities and countries around the world. A very prolific improviser, and for those of you who don't know Evan I can only encourage you to go along in two days to Evan's concert after midnight. Evan is very much known for, or more known known for his soprano saxophone playing, specifically for exploring techniques such as circular breathing, multiphonics, over blowing and so on. So, it's a great way, if you haven't heard Evan before, to come and listen to him that evening.

One of the works that I was inspired by, what I heard in the 90s, was Evan's work with live electronics, the Hall of Mirrors CD with Walter Prati. and again, it shows a real kind of drive for someone like Evan to keep developing, and he was always doing other stuff, experimenting.. In the late eighties and nineties he met some of his early heroes including Cecil Taylor and Coltrane's percussionist Rashied Ali.

There's a nice quote from the Guardian in 1993 when you played in the duo concert with Braxton, maybe you remember it? John Fordham in The Guardian, had raptured over what he says "saxophone improvisation of an intensity, virtuosity, drama and balance to tax the memory for comparison". Do you recall this quote? (Evan nods!) It's hard these days to find any journalist giving such raving reviews, I think. (Evan: "yeah, yeah, even John Fordham might struggle to be as enthusiastic now as he was then").

So finally, I thought I leave you with two quotes: from The Times "one of the music's greatest living instrumentalists" and The Wire called Evan "one of the modern era's most original voices".

For me, well, it's true but of course it begs the question what to ask a musician who has been interviewed so many times, been asked so many questions and who has a lot of interviews online...

So I thought I'm going to start with what is potentially a selfish question, but there's a good reason for this because I want to put it in the context of Portuguese improvisation. I tell you a little bit about the ethnographic work I have been doing last year, when I was living in Portugal for 6 months and had the great chance to interview lots of people including Gabriel (Ferrandini), Pedro (Sousa) but also people from different venues and labels, thinking about what we call experimental or free improvisation. So the question is a bit of a question of definition on free improvisation, but it stems from some of the talks I had with those musicians, as it became very clear that this label 'free improvisation', especially for the younger generation, often was very uncomfortable, and almost, it had this, it obviously has historical connotation / connection and maybe we can talk about this a little bit, but a lot of the younger musicians who I spoke to they weren't even, I have to say, particular aware of the historical lineage, which is great, but a lot of them weren't even that bothered about it.

So I guess if we take free improvisation as a kind of struggle or revolt against free jazz, in the late fifties, and see free improvisation not only as a musical, but a political and social movement and definitely probably a questioning of musical language in a larger context, I guess my question is to you, Evan, does this label of 'improvisation' still have meaning, relevance, does it have a place in your thinking, in your music-making, or are you not that bothered?

Evan: I find it a reasonable approximation. You can also say open improvisation, what does it mean, what does any of it mean actually? It's the specifics of the resulting activity. That's what people listen to. Theoretically it's very hard to define what you mean by freedom, you know, define what you mean by improvisation... These words are much more complex, to unpack than to use. "Free improvisation'", ok, what are you really saying when you say that? You know there's a freedom to … I guess the reason for emphasizing freedom is that it gives me maximum latitude to do what I feel like doing. And in fact, the most accurate description of what I do is I do what I feel

like doing at the time when I'm required to play. And sometimes that means playing more safe, in the sense playing things that I'm more sure of, and sometimes it means taking risks and probably the bigger occasions are the ones where you play safe, relatively safe, and the smaller more intimate occasions are the ones where you can take more risks. But 'free' in that sense... improvising in the sense that yeah, most improvising traditions are theme and variation style improvising. Whether the structure of the theme is 32 bars or 12 bars or whatever with a specific harmonic sequence, but that's another question. It tends to be the truth of the history of jazz (laughter amongst workshop participants as the "J' word - jazz - had been discussed many, many evenings with no real conclusion!).

But of course, jazz reached a certain point in the late fifties and probably already started to move towards that point 10 years before - we talked about Lennie Tristano for example 1949, the first recordings of what you might call free jazz or free improvisation - maybe those two Tristano sides "Digression" - they're not very successful free improvisations. Then you had Ornette Coleman's development, which was very much an expression of the genius of Ornette Coleman as an inventor of melodies, as a developer of lines independent of chorus structures, so much more open. They tended to work with fixed tempos and the bass player playing a kind of walking line, that seemed to be the way most of Ornette's music was organized, at least in the beginning.

And then things, I guess the Cecil Taylor thing, from the trio with Sunny Murray and Jimmy Lyons. Sunny Murray is no longer really playing time, there's no bass player, there's no fixed chorus structure. At the same time, you had Jimmy Giuffre Trio with Paul Bley and Steve Swallow, doing very open structures. So, things started at that point to become very loosely connected with jazz, except that some of those key characters when known for having done other work in the Jazz tradition. That's why we keep coming back to this 'Jazz' word and wondering what it means. It certainly means something in terms of the origins, but the continuation, as you say, many of the younger generations are not really that interested in that label, they're not interested in jazz, I know certainly some younger guy's based in London that find classic modern jazz almost boring, or boring, let's say they find it boring…. At this point people are coming, really from the 70s onwards, people were arriving from other genres, thinking about Fred Frith. Fred Frith's original group was pretty much a kind of rock group, but what do you call that kind of' 'thinking's person's rock music', I don't know... less hedonistic maybe than more traditional rock, I don't know. So, Fred gradually started to drift away from that rock thing into more open improvising with John Zorn, and so on. Connections started to be made, not just across genres, but across continents, across scenes...
For me everything, in the end, is about the individual voice and the way it seems to operate now is that people hear one another through recordings, or through word of mouth. Trusted colleagues will say "you should check out so and so"... and this is the way people gravitate together and people are discovered or invited. There is still some sense of what is relevant and what is developing and what is already fixed or more less fixed and understood. I think the fact that the younger players are not especially interested in the history is quite interesting. My experience of these two guys (pointing to Gabriel Ferrandini and Pedro Sousa) is that they know the history pretty well. It's not a necessity. I mean the most important thing from the playing perspective is to develop a sense of your own relationship to that tradition. And if you don't know much of that tradition than your relationship is going to be much more about your own sense of personal development and less about the tradition, but as you grow and develop you will come in contact with players who will talk to you about other things. You will need to learn the history slowly, if you want to be part of that history, that's what I would say.

Pedro: I was interested in one thing you said about risk-taking. You mentioned something, when depending on the venue and the conditions, you might feel that you might take more or less risks. And in the context of this question of what is free improvisation, I'm wondering whether one should force oneself to be put into situations where risk taking is possible? Does that come out of, or is it

related to those social encounters you spoke about? Where you place yourself into a group of musicians in which risk-taking is, perhaps, more likely than with other musicians?

Evan: It's something like a balanced diet. If it's all risk, maybe you get very thin. It is good until you become so think you can't lift up the saxophone anymore, but on the other hand if you indulge in the fat stuff then you get too big and flabby, and somewhere you have to find that balance diet between the risk that is a healthy diet but doesn't sustain the material existence. If you are going to do this all the time as a so-called professional musician, you have to earn a living and in order to do that you have to interact with the existing infrastructure which, in my case, when we began the existing infrastructure, was the musicians. There was no other infrastructure. We organised our own concerts, and when you go back to the origins of the connections with other European countries, in fact it was 'Free Music Production', was what they called the thing in Germany, based sort of half in Berlin, West Berlin in those days, and half in Wuppertal, where Brötzman lived. In Amsterdam you had the Instant Composers Pool, Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, and in those days the late Willem Breuker.
We made our own recording companies and we promoted our own records. In subsequent years an infrastructure has grown up around it; the whole business, now you have people that are festival organisers, you have people that are agents, you have people that are recording company executives, and they are just as serious about what they are doing as the musicians, which in a way is good because they can only have been attracted into making or building this infrastructure because of the music they heard.
That means that there is now, they're always was, I think, the possibility of earning some money. Some things were assisted, government assisted, from the Arts Council in the case of England, Arts Council assisted, or the various ways in which cultural funding bodies open their doors to recognise. I remember the first Committee in England, in those days it was still called the Arts Council of Great Britain, with an office and Piccadilly and the Charter carved in marble on the way in. A lot of politics has reduced this in the meantime, but there is great hope as the new guy of the Arts Council England is Nicholas Serota, the guy that built up the Tate Modern. A very strong individual if he wants to do something, he can do it, I think. So maybe there is a return to a proper relationship between culture and cultural funding in England. In Holland it's always been pretty stable and in Germany certainly more stable than in England, but with changes of fashion and all of that kind of thing.

That funding came into existence because the musicians were showing that 'well if you don't help us we are going to do it anyway'. So, they needed it to recognize that there was a movement afoot, and that's where these big gigs actually have come from, from something, although there is, everything is so complicated... See the Berlin jazz festival is probably the first European Jazz Festival. And it was a 'jazz' festival and the access to the jazz festival for the free players was more restricted. But there was access and gradually free jazz became part of a programming for the Berlin Jazz Festival. All the other European jazz festivals of stature and reputation, to one extent or another, include free jazz in their programming. Quite where free jazz turns into something else, I don't know, but that's a younger generation's problem to solve that, really, whether they feel the relevance of presenting their music in this context, or in that context - that's for them to decide.

We've been talking a lot about what does the word Jazz mean. It means almost nothing in a way, it means so much that it means nothing…

I wanted to define the.., it may not even be true that it's on the bigger, more prestigious occasions or let's say better paid occasions that you decide to reduce the risk. There might be something like a piece of your brain that makes a calculation without you really knowing what you are doing. But there's, because you're dealing with an audience, and the response of the audience is also part of the feedback; the kind of feedback loop between what you are doing and what you do next, and

that varies from place to place. So, to simply just say the big occasions = less risk, and the smaller occasions... even that might not be true, but they are those tendencies.

Franziska: Then I talk about responsibility, because I think that's a very interesting concept; also the interview I did with Gabriel (Ferrandini) - you talked to lot about responsibility, about context in a group and also this responsibility towards the listeners - and Evan, you have said this on many occasions in your own playing, that this is an enormous amount of detail that when people have to listen over a long period of time, and there's the sequence of details and they somehow they have been taken through a logical or narrative sequence and come to an end. But from a listener's point of view, and I think you had likened this to the words in Finnegan's Wake - all these sounds and words, but maybe it's much harder to have some kind of narrative structure or you get bogged down easily in the details of the words rather than seeing some larger patterns.

I think from an improviser's point of you, and as an improvising musician you are almost in a very privileged position when it comes to knowing an instrument, you said in an interview with Martin Davidson that as an improviser you imagine something and you find ways of making it work, technically work, and sorry if I quote you again, but what you said here makes a lot of sense: "it is very necessary to listen closely to what happens when you try to do things, because usually at the fringes of what you're producing is something that you're not really in control of - that there is a central thing that you are fully in control of, and then a kind of halo of suggested other possibilities which have to come with the central thing that you're in control of, whether it's a wisp of breath escaping from the side of the embouchure, or an overtone that you could push harder, or some key noise which you can't escape. There's always something there, and if you're listening at the fringes of the sound, as well as at the centre of the sound, then you can be led to other things and other possibilities."

So I wonder, with such detailed, or maybe we can almost say bipolar type of listening - you listen to yourself, you know yourself, the instrument relationship in such great ways, but you listen inside the center as well as at the fringes. What is it we can expect from an audience, from a listener's point of you, these overwhelming details or what I think are overwhelming details. Is it something that can only come with repeated listening? Is there a way of bringing the listener along in better ways, I guess, we are almost talking about an 'educational' aspect to this?

Evan: This makes me think of something that has happened often enough for me to think of a kind of pattern. Where people come up and introduce themselves, and the conversation turns around to "*The first time I heard you, I couldn't make head or tail, I couldn't make any sense of what you were doing",* and I say *"Why did you come back?".* And then the onus is on them to explain why they are there, because I don't, it is not in any way compulsory to attend an Evan Parker concert, thank God. Then they are in a quandary to explain why. "*There was something that attracted me... and now I like it very much*".

Maybe it is a bit like learning a language, I don't know. You know I have piles of analogies from interviews, which, now I quote my own interviews, the answers I came up with to the same question. I mean this answer was probably about 20 years ago? I don't think I would give the same answer now, I know what I was talking about then. Now it would be something else, but one of the analogies I use is poetry in a foreign language versus everyday conversation in that same language. I think if you don't even know the word for 'hello' in Polish, you would recognise the difference between somebody reciting poetry in Polish and somebody reading an article from the newspaper. And it is exactly that poetic quality of heightened sensibility to sound, which gives the distinction between successful improvised music and less successful improvised music. It has to sound more than just some sounds. It has to sound like some sounds which have meaning, however abstracted that meaning is.

Franziska: I did want to ask about John Stevens, it is not a particularly exciting question; it is more because you met him and you've played with him. I've said before he worked with the SME, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, but he's also one of the first ones who brought out a 'method' book. And of course we can discuss whether there should be anything like this, but this book called "Search and Reflect" published in 1987 and I use this a lot in my own teaching, I use some of the graphic scores. Very simply put the SME, and they were more rules, but there were two rules, and one of the rules was if you can't hear someone else you playing too loud, but also if what you are doing does not "at regular intervals, make reference to what you are hearing other people do, you might as well not be playing in the group". I guess there is a compositional aesthetic here which requires musicians to have these rules in mind, somehow […] I was wondering whether playing in SME or John Stevens' thinking and your own interpretation of the SME rules have influenced you through your time, and I'm particular thinking as you've done so many workshops and guided people in this music making. And of course, you have the people who are saying free improvisation shouldn't have any rules anyway, apart from not having a rule, if that's a rule...? So, John Stevens' ideas on rules should they be ignored; do we need them?

Evan: Again it is quite a difficult question to answer in one sequence. There's the practical history of the SME, which began as more of a co-operative group involving tunes, theme and variation type structures in the first record. When I listen to it I think "Well that's John's idea of Ornette, that piece is Trevor's idea of Eric Dolphy and that's Paul Rutherford's idea of George Russell". For me there's no problem in identifying what they were dealing with. They were making a Jazz record. The second SME record is where things start to be different, and now I have to say that at the time we made the record the working version of SME was just a duo with John and me, and John was really the leader but he had taken the decision to change the structure of the group so that it was only about him and me. That was because there was something we were working on to do with interaction and close listening, and he didn't think anybody else was really working at that level. So that was an instant promotion, the Office Junior was suddenly promoted to Vice president and it left some damage in its way. You can understand that people were not happy about that. 'What do you mean I'm not in the band anymore?' 'Well, you're not in the band".' John just stole the leadership of the band and he had the authority and the self-belief to do that. In technical terms, it was a collective band.

He wasn't in a position to say 'you're not in the band'. That was a group decision, but in those times things were so intense and so fast, and anyway there were quick formations of other groups to compensate. So, the "Search and Reflect' book really is a description of the things that John learned first by playing and then by thinking how can you teach other people, how to develop the hard listening skills. If I remember the book correctly, they are very strict systems of listening and responding and nothing to do with freedom. 'You do this and this is the exercise, and that was too loud and that was too quick... ' Of course, if you in the business of workshops it's very useful to have materials that you can just say 'No this is what you're supposed to do, this is correct, you are doing it wrong...' When you go to a workshop situation without that kind of material then, well we've just done a couple of days here, where you know that I don't have material like that. I'm just waiting to see what can I say that is useful in this situation. Of course it is now 40 odd years since SME took that decision and made that step into open improvising, and I have learned to question almost everything I think about everything at every point. So as soon as I say something I think well that's not true... I can bring massive amounts of doubt and confusion to the workshop situation. Only like "what the hell is he here for, he's not saying anything, he's not doing anything".

Usually I can find a way of pulling the thing off. I don't really look for these workshop situations, I don't consider myself to be very good at it, but I'm using, when I use things it's mostly about okay here we are, what are the acoustics like, what does the drum sound like, what would be a good place? Indeed, we did that yesterday, finding that place where we could almost solve the problems of your instrument being so relatively underpowered and the drums, okay, you solved it by only

bringing a part of your drum set and not the biggest sounding drums, so there were all kinds of adjustments that were made which helped the second day to be most successful, I think we agreed on that. Maybe I encouraged some of it, but I hope some of it was your own ideas on how to do it, on how to make it work better. To the extent that I have a formal kind of approach, it really comes out of the situation where people say “You should do something.., We heard that when you did that thing... in Italy for example, on the second day, one said “When you did the one down the road you did conduction”, and I said “But yes they asked me to do that”….

So then it's like conduction, is a kind of form of interaction. Is like a design for when a group gets so big that maybe hearing across the group, it works best with groups of orchestral proportions and diversity and it's actually due to the work of Butch Morris who gave up playing the cornet, he was a very good cornet player, friend of David Murray, American guy of a certain age, but younger than me I think, and he set out to codify a system of conduction, where he stands in front and organises a group of improvisers to play in a way that they wouldn't play if you want there. It's like the group elects someone to help them with the problem of coherence and hearing across the band. And I imitate some of those techniques that I learn because I played in several different contexts with Butch. I can tell you a little story what you might find funny. The first time I played was in the ‘Städtliche Museum’ in Amsterdam, and my dear friend Derek Bailey was there and he wasn't obeying the instructions; he wasn't looking at Butch and Butch said “Derek if that's going to work uou have to look at me”, and Derek looked at the ground and put the guitar back in the case and left. Butch was very clear about that, “If this is going to work you're going to have to look at me”, you can't treat the rest of the group as a background to you doing whatever you want to do. We all have to share in this strange kind of discipline. So I took the other view which is I know what Butch stands for and if I'm there, I'm going to try and make it work. If he asks me to play quietly or solo ... he had signs, this means '... (goes on to explain a few conduction signs)...

I can do this, it's basically a poor version of Butch's conduction, but my own feeling is, it is almost impossible to tell people or even a contradiction in terms to tell people how to improvise.

Pedro: Can I chip in on that theme, in the UK and in many other countries we are seeing more and more improvisation in schools, in an academic context, in university courses and so on. Let's take the 49 Tristano thing as a start, let's say it's a musical practice and what we're talking what we think has some common communality across the type of musicians, and the type of practice that were talking about - call it whatever we want -, but let's say it's a 60 year old practice. We are now seeing this development of embedding it in perhaps a wider musical context, which could be classical or jazz or pop or just improvised music. The same thing happened to Jazz, right? At some point, perhaps, in the seventies or eighties the teaching of jazz became formalised, to an extent that you can go and do your 3 years in Berkley and you come out and you sound like a jazz player, and one of the effects, in my view, was a historicism and solidification of the music along the same lines as that happened with classical music because that is the method and the Jazz teaching message was an adaptation of the classical music teaching method. Is there a danger that the music we are talking about and love can go down that path, and how does it relate to what with talking about with workshop situations, with conduction as a method or with "Search and Reflect', how do we avoid the problem?

Franziska: It's too late maybe? Is it too late?

Evan: No, it is precisely saved by its own impossibility. You know what ' Search and Reflect' does is not teach free improvisation, it teaches listening skills and instrumental control skills and things which can be of essential use in improvising. I better look at the book again, because perhaps I'm missing some parts of it which do deal with more suggestive approaches to improvising, but as far as I know and what I like about John’s book and I'm so pleased it's being recognized, because at the time when he was doing that there was nobody working on that kind of thing, so it is long overdue

for republication, and contextualisation and a decent kind of biography of John to be written and all of those characters. I mean with that very fat book by Ben Watson about Derek, which has some part of the story, so that's good, but I don't think it is really look that says everything there is to be said about Derek. There's almost nothing about John Stevens in book form, nothing about Paul Rutherford. These are all people that were part of that school in London. It was sort of the equivalent of the AACM, the Chicago group. It was a self-help group of musicians working, promoting, supporting one another's ideas, and the documentation is just not what it needs to be, but it's great that for example you are looking at the John Stevens stuff.

Franziska: Maybe David Toop's book is starting to dig out some of the stories? I agree with you, there's a big hole in terms of historical narrative, and that's why it's fantastic to speak to people like Evan and hopefully someone will write your story. Maybe you will write it yourself?

Evan: Also we shouldn't forget, and I'm sure you don't forget, that there was that overlap in a way with John Cage and indeterminate musics, and aleatoric musics, and groups such as Nuova Consonanza, and even before that there was a group in Japan of classical players that wanted to improvise. So, the history is.., some of the documentation is hanging on a thread. You know but it's there and it can be collated and analysed and slowly the world history will emerge in a more coherent form, but at the moment it is like George's book about Chicago, is very good on Chicago, David's book will be pretty good on London, and we just had the big exhibition in Munich for ECM and now there is one for FMP in the same space...

Franziska: ...and we talked last night, in a few years time, I guess someone will tell the Portuguese history. I'm really glad you mentioned the connection with aleatoric music and of course Stockhausen and Open Forms, and the musical language became so close from Western classical music and Jazz, free jazz, and improvised music and they somehow have maybe come apart again...?

Evan: … Cornelius Cardew is the crucial thing that turned AMM from being derived from jazz. Adding Cornelius to the group, because he wasn't a founding member of AMM, but he became a core (no pun intended - 'Core' was his nickname), member of what we think of as AMM, which is a different approach to improvising, which seems to me still to have more in common with aleatoric music, chance music, chance operations, whereas the John Stevens' approach is much more interactive. The history is sort of known, but it needs to be clarified and codified.

At this point we opened the discussion to include the Portuguese musicians and discussed the last two days of the workshop. *(Not transcribed)*

Franziska (wrapping up): I just wanted to say thank you to Evan for being here, for being part of the workshop, for leading and misleading us.. For me it is always a pleasure of being in the presence of (is it rude to say a historical figure?) You are almost a historical figure.... Evan Parker - thank you very much!