

# The Improvisational Techniques of Henry Threadgill

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In this paper I will discuss the improvisational techniques of Henry Threadgill. Instead of attempting to understand his diverse artistic output, which has undergone many levels of change, I will explore key aspects which demonstrate some of his important concepts. I will attempt to engage with a small part of his musical dialogue through key ideas including his intervallic language, approach to rhythm and use of dual drummers. When studying Threadgill, I consider his improvisational style directly linked to his compositions, insinuating that an understanding of his compositional techniques will inform the study of his improvisation.

Henry Threadgill was one of the early members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). A large amount of Threadgill's musical conception comes from his background with the AACM. Threadgill describes "*my experience is much like that of a lot of my contemporaries* {other AACM members, including Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman}. *We got interested in the idea of music, not the idea of jazz. And that means all music, any place where you can get information*".<sup>1</sup> This openness and willingness to explore all music is exemplified in his work, which merges many different rhythmic and harmonic musical ideas to create a unique musical language.

Threadgill does not define his music as jazz, not due to any objection to the style, instead due to the confusion of what jazz means. For Threadgill the phrase jazz has '*lost its meaning*' and no longer bears relevance. Instead he calls his musical style '*creative improvised music*' and doesn't necessarily feel any tie to a particular genre. He states: "*I've always understood how music got created here in America, and that I was under no obligation to do any particular thing. I do exactly the way I feel, whatever I want to do*".<sup>2</sup>

For my perspective Threadgill embodies much of the core ideology of the AACM. This ideology includes his vehement refusal to be classified or remain musically still. He has also sculpted his own musical language like so many members of the AACM; as stated by Michael Cuscuna: "*I can't divine a single cliché that he copied from somebody else*".<sup>3</sup> I consider the

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<sup>1</sup> Nate Chinen, *Henry Threadgill, Master of the Mutable* - NYTimes.com 2009. 8 Dec. 2014  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/arts/music/08chin.html?pagewanted=all>>

<sup>2</sup> Ethan Iverson, *Interview with Henry Threadgill (1)* - Do The Math. 2011. 8 Dec. 2014  
<<http://dothemath.typepad.com/dtm/interview-with-henry-threadgill-1-.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Nate Chinen *Henry Threadgill, Master of the Mutable*

ideology of the AACM that Threadgill represents to describe a musical approach as opposed to specific musical styles. This approach is highlighted by the freedom of self expression in any form.

George Lewis states: “*the musical influence of the AACM has extended across borders of genre, race, geography, and musical practice, and must be confronted in any nonracialized account of experimental music*”.<sup>4</sup> The work of every member of the AACM would be worth further study and exploration, I have chosen Threadgill for several reasons. I am personally drawn to his music as it seems extremely logical and coherent, but this logic only emerges after listening. On the first listen it’s hard to detect what will happen, but when it does it seems as though it was the only way the music could have happened. Additionally I am interested in his unique use of orchestration and his ability to maintain a singular voice as a multi-instrumentalist.

### Intervallic Language

Threadgill employs a harmonic vocabulary that draws on his extensive studies of many musical styles. He describes his harmonic style as a ‘*serial intervallic language*’<sup>5</sup> that is incorporated through larger and smaller structures. This language ‘*is such that we move from one series of intervals to another series of intervals throughout a piece of music*’.<sup>6</sup> These harmonic ideas are used in Threadgill’s improvisations as well as the improvisations of the musicians he involves in his projects.

One version of this language is shown in the table below; in this example all permutations are based on a C major triad. Starting with a major triad, two notes are always held from the triad. A third note is added using an interval contained in the previous iteration. In the table below, the major 3rd from C - E in the first chord is transferred to create the Ab below the C. The table shows where the previous interval stems from.

Table outlining intervallic language<sup>7</sup>

G		G		E		Bb	Min 3rd	E		D	Pft 5th.
E	Maj 3rd	C	Maj 3rd	C#	Min 2nd	G	C#-E	C	Pft 5th.	G	F-C
C		Ab	C-E	C	G-Ab	C		F	C-G	E	

<sup>4</sup> George E. Lewis *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* University of Chicago Press, 2008.p.x

<sup>5</sup> Ethan Iverson, *Interview with Henry Threadgill*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Notes from Myra Melford.

The intervallic language informs his improvisations and forces those playing with him to use new language in their improvisations. Liberty Ellman (the guitarist in his current group Zoid), discusses in reference to the intervallic cells of notes: *"In solos I use that information as a guideline, but occasionally you're going to break those rules so you feel like you're improvising. But if you focus on the interval set that he's given you, it gives you a sense of consonance in terms of the concept"*.<sup>8</sup> Ellman elaborates that early on when he was playing with Threadgill; *"if I played with a jazz vocabulary, it didn't sound good in the context of the music"*.

By using such a structured set of harmonic material in composition and improvisation Threadgill is able to help blur the boundaries between improvised and composed material. This creates a uniformity of the musical material that allows improvisers to engage with notated material and develop new ways of approaching improvisation

## **Rhythm**

The most prominent aspect of Threadgill's rhythmic approach to me, is the absence of a regular barline. Sometimes it does feel as though the music could be theoretically divided into different measured sections, but this does not really correspond with how I think the music works. In Threadgill's improvisations, as well as in his compositions this absence identifies his style. He describes his thinking as basically in 1/4 so there is never a rigid bar structure.

*I don't want any sense of meter because when you sense meter, you see and feel division. This is over, and this is coming next. It gets in the way of the flow. The flow is everything in film, everything in theater, everything in literature, everything in architecture, everything in dance, everything in music.*

*Achtud El Buod (Children's Song)* is a piece composed by Threadgill and performed by New Air a trio with Fred Hopkins (bass) and Pheeroan akLaff in 1986. The bass and drums lay down a relatively metric groove that is essentially in 4/4. Threadgill's improvised solo over this melody is strictly in time but phrases start and end at different points, at no stage in the alto solo (from 0:30 - 3:00) does a phrase begin on beat 1. By using different phrase lengths, and starting and ending points this solo has no feeling of adherence to the bar line. Even so, it always creates a strong rhythmic identity that fits completely over the more structured metric

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<sup>8</sup> Nate Chinen, Regarding Henry - THE GIG - Typepad. 2009. 8 Dec. 2014  
<<http://thegig.typepad.com/blog/2009/11/regarding-henry.html>>

patterns. I believe that this solo demonstrates a rhythmic momentum and flow through the absence of the 'demarcation'<sup>9</sup> of the bar.

### **The Dual Sextett Drummers**

Threadgill's use of two percussionists/drummers in his group Sextett (which recorded 6 albums between 1982 and 1989) represents key points of his musical conception. While considering the use of two drummers feels as though it is a superficial part of his music to discuss, the choices behind their use epitomise much of his music. Pheeron akLaff is on drums for the first 5 albums and is replaced by Newman Baker on the 6th album. John Betsch plays drums on the first 3 albums with Reggie Nicholson taking his place on the following 3 albums. Threadgill's use of the drumkit shows his extreme attention to detail and atmosphere while helping to demonstrate how his wider musical conception is realised.

The use of two drummers in Threadgill's Sextett has significant rhythmic implications but is also largely a harmonic and orchestrational decision. Threadgill describes that between the two drummers he had the pitches of the chromatic scale across the bass drum, two floor drums, two upper toms and the snare drum.<sup>10</sup> One drum kit was tuned in fourths (like the bass of the ensemble), while the other was tuned in fifths (like the cello). Using this combination he was able to almost attain the entire chromatic scale, just missing one note. To create a dense harmonic environment drum parts were highly notated around these pitches. Threadgill discusses:

*Everything was written, just like every string part was written... It was almost like having 10 timpani on stage, and when you have the bass with E, A, D, G, and the drums are tuned to those pitches too, you know what you have, don't you?*

*Sympathetic vibrations! E-A-D is a huge note because it has been activated.*

Threadgill's method of tuning for the drumkits creates a much larger musical palette, possibly due in part to the sympathetic vibrations. Sonically this system creates a larger drum sound as each kit has a self contained sound that works as part of the greater musical atmosphere. It also allows the drums to be used in different musical ways; in *The Devil Is on the Loose and Dancin' with a Monkey* a tom acts as a harmonic pedal tone behind the central melodic figure. Threadgill discusses that part of the influence for tuning drums, stems from

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<sup>9</sup> Ethan Iverson, *Interview with Henry Threadgill*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

African music where drums are tuned in a specific manner. Rhythmically, the drums represent an extension of what is already taking place in the music (as previously discussed). Threadgill mentions that he always used '*one drummer that played this far behind the beat and another drummer that played almost ahead of the beat. So the beat is that wide, so you could lay information in quite differently. You got a lot of room for laying information, and that's the same thing that happens in Latin music*'.<sup>11</sup>

The Sextett's final album *Rag, Bush and All*, represents the culmination of the groups recordings and perhaps has the most highly developed use of the dual drummers. The first track, *Off the Rag* begins with the dual drums creating a rhythmic barrage, and presupposes the following melody by creating a counter melody across the toms which carries into the opening. This is followed by an alto solo over the bass and dual drum kits. To me, it sounds as though the combined drum kits are creating a harmonic comping texture that in other music may be taken by a piano or guitar. The Sextett doesn't contain a chordal instrument (piano or guitar); I believe that this chordal role still exists in the form of the tuned drum kits, as most apparent in the alto and trombone solo in *Off The Rag*. The tuning of the drum kits allows a higher level of blend and placement in the highly structured harmonic complexity of the music.

### **Improvisatory Moments**

One of my favourite improvisations is Threadgill's solo on *Spotted Dick is Pudding* which follows straight on from the trombone solo (begins 4:30). The composition is from the album *Easily Slip Into Another World*, played by his ensemble Sextett and recorded in 1987. Compositionally, Threadgill employs a highly contrasting form underneath the trombone improvisation and his improvisation on alto saxophone. While the trombone solo takes place over a continuous groove with only slight changes, the alto solo has some major structural variations.

The alto solo continues on the momentum built from the trombone solo. Threadgill starts very melodically, developing two different sets of motif, that combined gradually ascend. From this point he inserts a different more rhythmically jarring idea that creates a sustained tension. At 5:45 this tension concludes in a sense of absolute cohesion, even though so many different layers are still taking place. Threadgill plays a melodic idea alternating between one note, with one version 2 octaves higher than the other. This figure draws the whole solo to a high, that

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<sup>11</sup> Ethan Iverson, *Interview with Henry Threadgill*

feels intrinsically linked to the original compositional design. This two note melody eventually becomes more and more rhythmically displaced. From this point the improvisation could come to a conclusion however instead the ensemble launches into a double time accompaniment, while Threadgill retains similar ideas from earlier in the solo. What is most impressive is that even though there is the sudden change from the rhythm section, Threadgill's style is consistent and so strong that it feels like a seamless transition.

I consider artists such as Threadgill's improvisational style inherently linked to his method of composition. There is an inevitable superficiality to discussing an artist with as large and diverse output as Threadgill. In this paper I have only touched the surface of some of his ideas although have hopefully engaged with part of his musical dialogue.

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