



Leroy Jenkins

interview by Ken Gallo of Meet The Composer

Some forty years after he began his association with Chicago's landmark Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), composer/violinist Leroy Jenkins is still miffed at the need to categorize his music. "The different definitions have only served to confuse people, including myself," he says. "I really don't know myself what I play, except American music. I'm an American artist and I play American music."

The confusion shouldn't matter much to Mr. Jenkins who, having recently turned 70, had already established himself as a pioneer of modern improvisation. But therein lies the gist of an argument. To some, the term "improvised music" is associated with the category "jazz." The case of Mr. Jenkins is more complicated though. Playing "improvised music" on a traditional string instrument, his work gets pegged in a gray area between jazz and classical. "The classical people say I'm not classical, and the jazz people say I'm not jazz," he says. "What are you gonna do?"

Mr. Jenkins' "Color Eugoloid" (created with support from MTC's Commissioning Music/USA program) premiered September 2002 in Philadelphia by the quartet *Relâche*. The piece was a score to the 1931 Irving Browning silent film "City of Contrasts," a bleak, episodic documentary of Depression-era New York. *The Philadelphia Enquirer* cited the score's "adventurous atonality."

In over fifty years in music, Mr. Jenkins has collaborated with such luminaries as Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Archie Shepp, Alice Coltrane, Joseph Jarman, Cecil Taylor, Wadada Leo Smith, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Albert Ayler,

just to name a few; he has received grants/commissions from the NEA, The Rockefeller Foundation, The New York City Opera, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, among many others; and he has been the composer-in-residence at Oberlin College, Brown University, The University of Michigan, The University of Illinois, Carnegie Mellon, and The California Institute of the Arts.

MTC: When you first started playing the violin, were you playing traditional classical music?

LJ: Not really. When I was 8 or so, my first teacher, who also led the church orchestra I played in at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago - my hometown - introduced me to the music of black composers like Clarence Cameron White and William Grant Still. Those were composers who composed in a traditional classical style, but I didn't play that music with the orchestra. Most of the music was church music, mainly hymns... "Onward Christian Soldier"...things like that. Usually, I would play with two other violinists and a piano. One of the violinists was Ellis McDaniels who would later be known as Bo Diddly.

MTC: Did you want to be a classical violinist?

LJ: Oh yeah. That's what I studied at Florida A&M. I wasn't solely interested in the violin though. In high school, I played bassoon in concert band, the sax to make money, the clarinet in the marching band... I was playing 4 different instruments in high school and later at college. After college I decided to concentrate on the violin. I sold the sax I had for the money needed to get to Mobile (AL), where I had a gig teaching. I played in a classical concert down there not too long after I arrived. I realized that night I wasn't gonna make it in classical music. Very few people showed up. The South was pretty segregated at the time and black people just weren't interested in classical music. That's when I started to play straight ahead be-bop on the violin, improvising on the chord changes.

MTC: How did you go about that? Did you "un-learn" everything you had been taught on the violin?

LJ: I had to re-organize the way I played that's for sure. Obviously, jazz and classical are quite different. It wasn't an easy thing to do. I had some great teachers though: John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderly, Dave Brubeck, Horace Silver; whatever was popular during the 60s.

MTC: How did people react to it?

LJ: They seemed to like it. I was a pretty good improviser on the saxophone. I used the same ideas on my violin.

MTC: When did you get away from the structure of be-bop?

LJ: In 1964, when I went back to Chicago and got involved with the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians). At that time, the organization was just being chartered and all the original founders, Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, and Joseph Jarman were very active. I had

known Muhal beforehand. I remember him talking about starting the organization, while I was still in Mobile. They were making a conscious decision to do something different. Most of the guys were saxophone players who were influenced by what Ornette Coleman was doing. I had no idea what it would be like until I heard it for myself. The first thing I heard was a concert by Roscoe and his band, and that was it. The players didn't play chord changes. As result of the freedom, you didn't hear the same licks that you heard in be-bop. I had never heard anything like it before. I started playing in Muhal's big band. We used charts, but they weren't like any I had ever seen. The music wasn't written with 8 or 12 bar phrases. It was strictly improvisational. Muhal would tell us what he wanted to hear, and we would do it. Through improvising, we created what would be the "head" for the tunes. When I first played with those guys I was able to explore. It was amazing. I could roam. I could play from my imagination... I could be "violinistic."

MTC: How did the other players treat you as the only string player, beside bass?

LJ: Everybody loved that I played the violin. They encouraged me.

MTC: As an improviser, how important was it to lose chord changes?

LJ: Playing be-bop was like having train tracks in front of you. There is only one way to go: straight ahead, follow the tracks...you can't go left or right. Without changes, I could play anything I wanted. As Duke (Ellington) said, as long as "it swung" it was cool. I don't mean a 2/4 kind of swing like a be-bop tune. It "swung" in that it had movement. It had an arc. You know what I mean? That became my thing: getting from one place to another in a tune.

MTC: You did Coltrane's "Giant Steps" on one of your solo recordings (*Solo*, released by Lovely Music 1998). That tune is a serious workout as far as chord changes go, with chords changing every beat. How did you approach that?

LJ: If someone wanted to practice playing over chord changes, Giant Steps would be a great exercise. The chord changes come at you so fast. Who wants to play an exercise? You want to enjoy yourself. I kept the melody in my head, but I wasn't following the tracks like I mentioned before. You know? I played my version of that tune. My version was not about playing the chord changes. Don't get me wrong, I love the piece. I love to hear Coltrane playing it. It's personal to Coltrane's ideology at that time. But, my version isn't about that. I probably had more fun playing it than Coltrane did (laughs).

MTC: I read that you developed a new concept of improvisation when you were teaching at California Institute for the Arts. Could you explain?

LJ: I wouldn't say it was new. I would call it a form of "orchestrated improvisation." I introduce motifs and melodies, and set up an improvisational map. You start with a melody and end with a melody and improvise in between. So you get a balance of the written part with the chaos of the improv. For example, with 4 different musicians, we take 12 bars...4 beats in each bar. In those 12 bars, I set up a certain meter. The players improvise within the 12

bars... solos or duets, depending on the map. After one finishes, another comes in and so on. With the basic formula you utilize the number of players, the number of beats, and the number of measures. Depending on how many players there are it's wide open. With 12 players, you can have 4 groupings of 3 players, or 3 groupings of 4 players, or whatever you choose. You see? When players think in terms of the meter, it's easier for them to create a direction within their improvisation, and, if they repeat it in an indeterminable amount of time - I.A.T. is how I notate it in the score - the players become accustomed to the form and relax. The great thing is no matter how many times it repeats, it's always different.

MTC: The piece "Color Eugoloid," that was premiered last month by Relâche, utilized your concept. How did Relâche approach it?

LJ: It was hard at first, but Relâche is a very open minded group. They're classically trained musicians and this was new to some of them. The violist was very upset with me. The way he was looking at me one day, I thought he was going to kill me (laughs). I explained to him that improvisation is what I'm all about. For me to write something without any improvisation involved would be pure hypocrisy. But, after a while he (the violist) came up big. He smoked.

MTC: Do you encounter a lot of hesitation from players who aren't used to improvising?

LJ: All the time. Some of the players are really shook up and fearful. When I wrote a string quartet for The Kronos Quartet some years back, they were a little hesitant at first. They would ask: what do you want me to do? In the end, they were cool with it. That was way back in the early eighties. They weren't famous yet. Now look at them. They were the ones that introduced my music to a large audience. Anyway, it was something they had never done before at the time. When you ask classically trained players to improvise, they think they should play jazz licks. For some reason Americans, and the West in general, think of improvisation as jazz. They haven't got it out of their system yet.

MTC: Why do you find your CDs in the jazz section, when they're not really jazz?

LJ: That's the reason some of us don't get credit for what we do, because people don't know where to put us. People like myself and Anthony Braxton, Muhal, Roscoe, Wadada Leo Smith...we're all in the same boat. I don't know why it is. The classical people say I'm not classical, and the jazz people say I'm not jazz. There I am in the middle. What are you gonna do? I've listened to some of my recordings over the years and you know what? I play the violin real well. I am a fine violinist. If I fit into a category and there was no confusion as to "what" music I play, I would be rich. You wouldn't be able to get an interview with me. (laughs) I would be too famous. Too busy. As it is, I have the time for you. I don't have any trouble with it anymore. Even though I could go on and on about this, I understand.

MTC: How often do you play?

LJ: Not very often. I pick it up once a week or so. I've been playing for sixty years. I don't need to practice. If I get a gig, I just show up. I don't need to rehearse. I'm going to Chicago soon to play with Joseph Jarman at the Hot House. We're not rehearsing anything. We've known each other for years. What is there to rehearse? As the old be-boppers used to say, we just "hit." Right now, I'm working on getting some of my old music onto my computer. That's a big project.

MTC: *String* magazine called you "the father of extended improvisational string music." What's your response to that?

LJ: Isn't that something? I don't like the idea of being called the father of anything (laughs). I accept the compliment though. It's very nice.