

Shaping Noise Into Music

BY BEN ALLISON

Notes are overrated. That probably sounds strange coming from a musician. Music, especially jazz music, is about notes, right?

At one point in my development as a bassist and a composer, I viewed melody and harmony as the basic building blocks for all music, so it followed that they should be the starting point for my compositional process. But two experiences changed my mind.

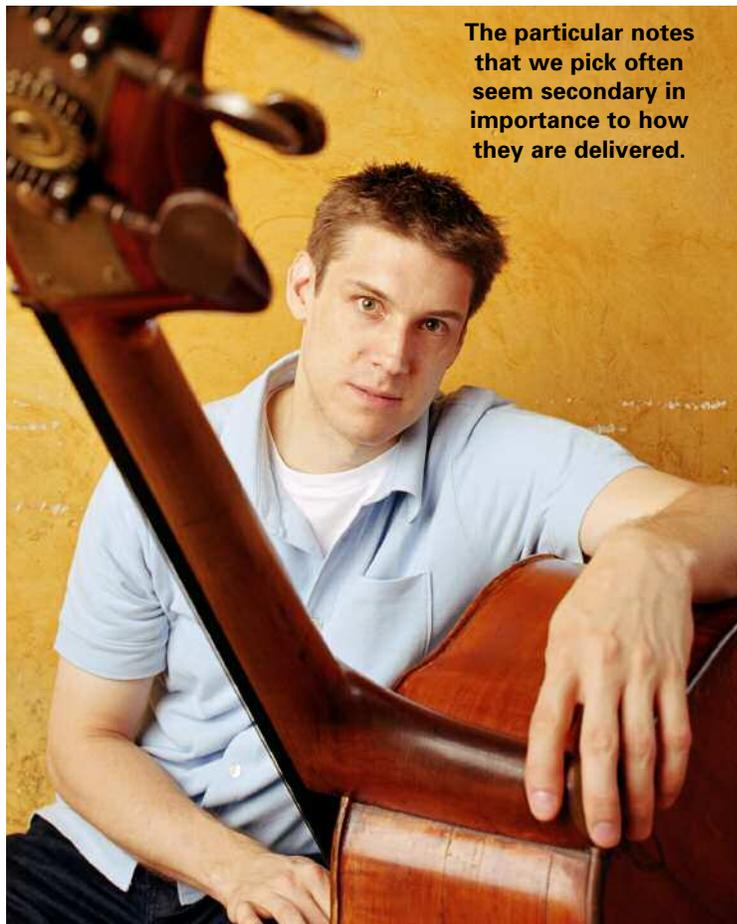
In the early 1990s, I was at the beginning of my career and was playing in restaurants and bars for small money. I was glad to have a chance to play. But at times it was a frustrating existence, made all the more so by restaurant managers who would often complain about the music we were playing. On one gig, the manager grumbled that we never played anything “old” that people would recognize. This was particularly annoying since the tune we were playing at the time was *Sophisticated Lady* (written in the early 1930s I believe). How far back did this fool want us to go?

But instead of arguing the point, I tried a little experiment. I asked the guys in the band to play a fully improvised tune, but to play it in a “vintage style.” So we made up a tune on the spot, complete with a simple melody, a random cycle of ii/V chord progressions and a bridge that happened to go to the IV chord. At times, it sounded a bit atonal, but the tenor player pulled out all his Ben Webster stuff, the drummer set up a nice brushy swirl, and I thumped some simple rhythms. The manager walked by and gave us the huge thumbs up and said, “Finally, a tune people will recognize. What is it by the way?” I told him it was a classic called *Fools Believe*, and he nodded with an air of recognition.

I now see this small moment as a turning point in my musical development. I began to realize that it is not “what” you play but “how” you play that is important. Most of what we musicians focus on in terms of the technical side of music is lost on many listeners. The audience is listening to the music and experiencing it for what it is. They don’t want to know the grammar behind the poetry. In many ways, all the theory and mental gymnastics become irrelevant.

The second thing that profoundly influenced my compositional process was not a single event but rather an increasing awareness over time of other musical traditions. After moving to New York City, I became exposed to a lot of music that did not evolve from the European classical tradition. One thing that struck me was how much of this “other” music did not use harmony at all. In fact, much of the music in the world is comprised of just melody. Harmony as we think of it in the West is really a European convention. Our beloved V chord resolving to the I chord (the “Amen” part of the mass) is just not that big a deal to many people. Another thing that does not figure largely in much of the world’s music is the tempered scale (another European convention).

All of this is not to say that harmony is not important to me in terms of my compositions. But the realization that it was not necessary to use har-



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mony, or melody for that matter, as the starting point was an eye opener.

I admit that I still care about “what” I play, but I am trying to care less and less each time I pick up my bass or write a tune. My eleven-week old daughter does not care what sounds she makes, she just makes them. However, I am concerned with “how” I play. Like every musician, I’m always working on my musical technique. In a basic sense we use technique to shape noise into music, just like we shape stone and wood to create buildings.

I think of musical technique as the ability to get what’s in your heart and mind out through your fingers. And the particular notes that we pick often seem secondary in importance to how they are delivered. So much of what moves me musically lies in the little details: a squeak, a cracked note, a delayed entry, even silence. And as a composer and improviser I sometimes have to remind myself of this as I’m laboring too long over a little detail in a composition or thinking too much about what I’m going to play. In some ways, music has little to do with notes.

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New York bassist/composer Ben Allison recently released his sixth solo CD, *Buzz* [Palmetto]. Since co-founding the Jazz Composers Collective in 1992, Allison has played on over 35 records, including releases from Frank Kimbrough, Michael Blake, Lee Konitz, and the Herbie Nichols Project. www.benallison.com