

difference to continue doing your own thing when someone else has made a bold, attention-grabbing statement. And even when players are working together, if one breaks off and starts down a new path, a possible strategy is for the other player not to change course, but to continue as if they were still working jointly, staying on the same path. Take a saxophonist and a drummer, Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink, for instance, bringing things to a boil, playing hot-and-heavy energy music—all of a sudden, paddling the snare with a mighty whack, Bennink slams on the brakes. If Brötzmann continues apace, his tenor sax ferociously barreling along, this has an inherent dramatic effect, like Wile E. Coyote running out of cliff. In this case, you can imagine how the musicians must be palpably aware of their own momentum and the momentum of the total music at the same time. That ability to hear the specific and the general at once is basic to improvising. The musicians have to work together and be prepared to stand apart more or less at any instant.

Improvisation is social music. The shapes it

takes and the methods used to make it are collective in nature, often gregarious, interactional. Like the inner workings of a pride of lions, a parliament of owls, a cloud of bats, a bloat of hippos. But there are antisocial elements in the music, too, solitary, uncommunicative moments, times when the collective is shunned in favor of the individual. The antisocial impulse helps keep the music from growing predictable. Just like our beloved introverts and eccentrics do in daily life.

Let's say the two extremes are complete dependence and absolute independence. Players either slavishly rely on one another or pay absolutely no mind to anyone else whatsoever. In between there's a gray area, where most of the activity really occurs: interdependence. Improvisors are constantly modulating these interaction dynamics in subtle ways, moving along that scale, by turns listening to and willfully ignoring one another. As a listener, the challenge in the case of independence is to hear the composite, to feel the buildup of tension—or perhaps to experience the dissipation of tension—of two or more colliding bodies, each

dependence X independence  
complete } absolute