

performance a special kind of character: a fragile, almost-falling-apart feeling.

Improvisors can be imps. They like to get a rise out of one another, to nip at the heels, jostle, and cajole. They also like to build things, to work together on a common cause. But working together doesn't mean all doing the same thing. It's not synchronized swimming. Watch for the impish moments, the places where someone makes an abrasive or contrary move. And keep an ear out for the consensual moments, where you have the overall feeling everyone's on the same page, the troops are rallied, the wagons are packed, and the caravan hits the road.

A final consideration: at times dispute in improvising is left unresolved because it betrays what one experienced figure refers to as "a misunderstanding." That is, the parties involved can't find a way to work together, and despite wanting to, they can't find a joint solution. This kind of kludge makes for very uncomfortable listening, like when you hear people trying to have a conversation but not able to connect.

5. Support/Stepping Up

The questioning of conventional roles doesn't mean improvisors can't adopt roles ad hoc as the music proceeds. For example, within the "building together" modality, something that often takes place is a process of stepping up. And when someone steps up, unless they decide to square off and tussle, the others usually need to find something to do to support the stepper-upper.

There are countless versions of this, but it's pretty fundamental. In jazz it would simply be referred to as a solo, but in freely improvised music it's often a bit more subtle—one player is foregrounded takes it upon themselves to make a statement, and the others back off or find some kind of platform for the statement. That platform could be a low drone or a repeated figure or just dropping out and letting the player step up unaccompanied.

I've seen the saxophonist Ken Vandermark employ this strategy quite a lot, particularly on pieces where he's playing clarinet. Out of a complex, multifaceted passage featuring lots of dense interplay, Vandermark might step up and lay a de-