

it's a few years old but still pristine. You admire it, take for granted how effortlessly it rolls along under its own steam; you adore its aerodynamics, the faux-leather interior, the pop-up headlights, the way it purrs. It's an entity, an immaculate machine. But under that fetching hood, there are hundreds of little mechanisms, all doing their own thing, linked up to one another, calibrated to make the car stop and go. The mechanisms have complex relationships. They signal one another, turn one another on and off, heat up, cool down, spark, explode, contain and concentrate energy, regulate speed and intensity and flow. They exist individually, apart, but engaged in a complex system. The separate parts conspire to give the overall impression of a single functional automobile.

Sit up straight. Look smart. Pay attention. This is the most important section of the book or, as my father-in-law says, the tastiest part of the pig.

Free improvisors tend to avoid or reject certain standard elements of the musical tool kit—steady rhythm, conventional harmony, melody. In the place of these usual objects of fascination, there's

this other thing to pay attention to: interaction dynamics. How are the players relating to one another? What kinds of exchange are going on? Or not? Are they listening to the others, or are they off playing on their own? How does what they do correspond to the actions of the others?

Individual improvisors might be likened to the parts of that car: separate but interrelated. This is the single most exciting thing in the music, what sets it furthest apart from other kinds of music making, so you should perk up and learn what to listen for. The question is does the car metaphor hold?

At once the most visceral and the headiest aspect of improvised music, interaction dynamics might well be what you see when you look under the hood. All the idealism that is sometimes mapped on to free music—the notion that it's like a miniature model of egalitarian society; that it represents a communal way of working together—is extrapolated from the way players interact. The palpable sense of give-and-take and the excitement of watching musicians building something jointly