

finite melodic clarinet statement over whatever else his compatriots are doing. This has a narrative, storytelling quality, as if, out of the abstract bramble, there was a tale yearning to be spun. Vandermark's pretty masterful at peddling the story and managing not to assume a controlling position, a selfish move that makes everyone else subservient and can kill forward impetus as fast as a blowout on the highway.

6. Making Space vs. Being Tentative

Someone who steps up all the time might not be leaving enough room for anyone else. This is another observable phenomenon: the activity of making space. If someone's playing is so busy that it's impenetrable, that can make it difficult for anyone else to find a way into the music. It's like someone who never stops talking—this takes the "inter" out of "interaction." All kinds of narcissism and personality disorders come to the fore in improvised music—it's such a profoundly social music, that it's almost like you could use it to make a psychological profile of the participants. But it's

an art form, too, not just a window on the musicians' psyches; and top-flight players use these dynamics to their own ends, sometimes adopting a persona that's different from the one they have in everyday life. Shy ones become animals; monsters become wallflowers.

An otherwise friendly player might "crowd" the others to get a specific result, to force them to step up, for instance, or to draw out some kind of latent aspect of their playing. On the other hand, when players make space for one another, there's a threshold after which the act can express a tentativeness, overpoliteness, sometimes with disastrous results. Suddenly everyone's saying: "No, after you." Improvised music is like a balloon, it needs some tension to keep it taut; lose the tension, and the music farts around and falls limp on the floor.

7. Counterpoint

Listening to an improvisation, I sometimes hear the sounds in terms of dance. Here, the dancers are not all doing the same thing—again, it's not