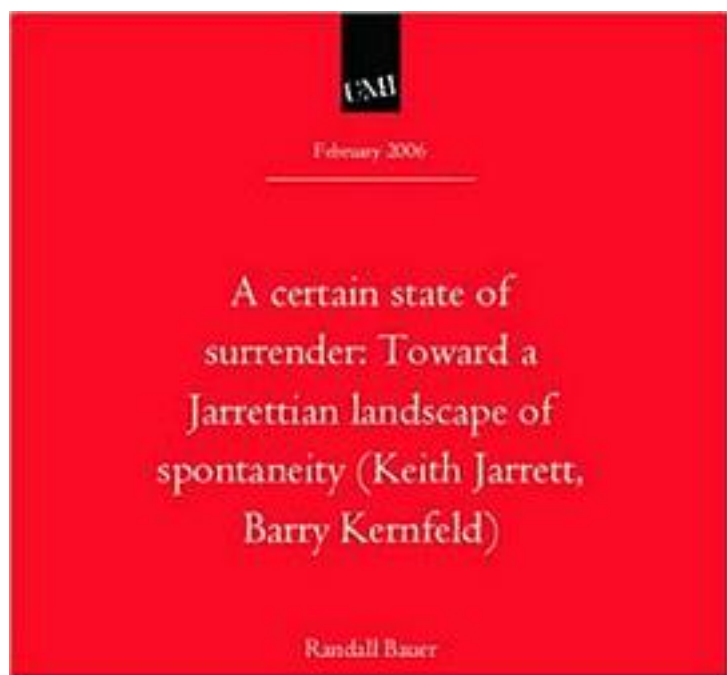


A certain state of surrender



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This essay is an examination of spontaneity in jazz improvisation, particularly as manifested in the music of Keith Jarrett. While improvisation is often defined as

“spontaneous composition”; for the majority of jazz improvisers the concept of pure or absolute spontaneity is less a constant companion during performance than may be supposed. To determine the content and flow of an improvisation depends more on a lifetime of experience in developing a jazz vocabulary and learning how to shape a solo in real time. What is perhaps most spontaneous is the <italic>process</italic> of organizing a solo: the streamlining and concatenating of moment-appropriate material into a logical, organic whole. Jazz scholar Barry Kernfeld has developed a concise improvisational taxonomy whereby the many components of jazz improvisation are categorized as “paraphrase-oriented” or “motivically-based” and so on. Where Keith Jarrett's approach to improvisation differs from these classifications lies in his predilection for avoiding such a so-called “formulaic” approach. He chooses not to rely on clichés or predictable patterns, and remarkably, there is little repetition in his work. For this very reason, imitation of Jarrett's playing is difficult, as there is no established, pervasive style-guide to follow. Jarrett's own improvisational personality may be defined by its complexity, which derives from the uniqueness of every project he has undertaken. In the first chapter, I discuss the concept of spontaneity as it is related to jazz improvisation. Chapter Two details Kernfeld's taxonomy of jazz improvisation and reports on the typical sources from which improvisers draw material; it further discusses how Jarrett's approach to improvisation indicates a conscious avoidance of tapping such sources. The following three chapters examine various features of Jarrett's improvised work, from a complete solo improvisation; to his treatment of improvised introductions and codas when playing standards; to his use of transition and his affinity for vamp-based repetition, or musical “fixations”; as I call them; and my own reactions to particularly inspiring, “magical” moments found in selected improvisations. The final chapter connects the principles of risk and surrender with Jarrett's own thoughts on improvisation.

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