

## Music Unlimited 38: THE FUTURE IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

The idea behind the Music Unlimited 38 programming and its title are based around the essential dynamic that exists between innovators from the past and present, and how this interplay will affect the future. This dynamic does not indicate that artists from earlier generations cease to be revolutionary or that the work of younger musicians is automatically “new.” Each band and individual performing in Wels from November 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> epitomize this ongoing dialectic of innovation, so essential to the history of improvised music.

My musical foundation was built from experiences in the United States provided to me by my parents that included an immeasurable number of concerts and recordings associated with the history of jazz and what is often termed free jazz. Later, the history and aesthetics of improvised music from Europe came to have an equal impact on my creative thinking. I grew up listening to albums by artists like John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Gil Evans, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker which were played continually on the home stereo. Most importantly, I was fortunate to live in the Boston area when it was possible to see hundreds of concerts by musicians like Art Blakey, Alan Dawson, Johnny Griffin, Billy Higgins, Herb Pomeroy, Sammy Price, and James Williams on a regular basis, often seeing the same group several times in a single week. It became clear to me at a very young age that jazz was a creative methodology, not a style. This tradition, of the creative process being more essential than the replication of codes, has also been crucial for the strategies of improvised music developed across the European continent, whether using compositional elements or not. The program for Music Unlimited 38 is meant to indicate how, on each side of the Atlantic and in Japan, the formation of new procedures for music and improvisation has a history that never stopped continuing to thrive.

Though the records and concerts I first listened to were most often associated with mainstream jazz, at the age of 17 my father played “Good-Bye Tom B” from Joe McPhee’s solo album, *Tenor*, for me. It permanently changed the game for me. My listening started to focus on the avant-garde and I was fortunate that, around this same time, Joe Morris was performing with his trio and group Sweatshop on a consistent basis in the Boston area. These early experiences with more radical approaches to jazz and improvisation were critical and led me to many concerts by Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, and Archie Shepp during my college years in the mid 1980s, all later matched by life altering encounters with European artists after I moved to Chicago.

For example, one night after a performance with the Territory Band in Guimarães during November of 2001, Paul Lytton said to me, “The English improvisers had to make the decision to turn away from the American jazz we loved to find our own music. What are you going to do?” A week hasn’t gone by since when I haven’t thought about his question. Then there was the time in 2015 when Terrie Hessels invited me to come to Addis to perform with Getachew Mekuria. It was a concert held at the Ethiopian National Theater that included The Ex, other European collaborators, and many performers from Ethiopia. To be on that historic stage playing with one of the most significant musicians in that country’s history was the result of a creative narrative impossible to foresee as a kid from the suburbs of Boston. And it’s a narrative that testifies to the power and possibility of music.

Regular exposure to musicians like Paul and Terrie started in the early 1990s with the help of writer/curator, John Corbett, who introduced me to recordings of European improvised

music after I moved to Chicago. This learning curve rapidly advanced when John began to invite many of these artists to perform on a weekly music series we co-presented at the Empty Bottle starting in the mid 90s which continued through 9 annual music festivals. Significantly, four introductions provided by John were to Peter Brötzmann, Mats Gustafsson, Terrie Hessels, and Paul Lytton; meetings which generated some of the most important collaborations in my career.

The effect that artists from these two continents, and later Japan, have had on my own work has been truly profound. To celebrate this impact, I have invited musicians and ensembles from the U.S., Europe, and Japan to present their work at the 2024 Music Unlimited festival. All of these artists have provided essential groundwork for the current international scene and, I believe, will carry this radical music forward into the future. To illustrate the range of invention taking place in contemporary improvised music, I have programmed working groups that have developed their unique aesthetics over time- Arashi, Circus, DKV Trio, Edition Redux, The Ex, g a b b r o trio, Gush, and the Paul Lytton & Nate Wooley duo- alongside rare collaborations and first-time configurations of artists. In addition, there are a series of concerts that focus on the duo, one of my favorite formats to perform in or listen to. Aside from my concert with Joe McPhee, all these afternoon sets on Saturday and Sunday feature an initial encounter between the players.

Many of the musicians performing at the 38th edition of the Music Unlimited festival belong to the Catalytic Sound musician cooperative. These include Jaap Blonk, Tim Daisy, Lily Finnegan, Mats Gustafsson, Ingebrigt Haker Flaten, Ben Hall, Elisabeth Harnik, Terrie Hessels, Bonnie Han Jones, Christof Kurzmann, Damon Locks, Paul Lytton, Joe McPhee, Andy Moor, Joe Morris, Paal Nilssen-Love, Luke Stewart and Nate Wooley.

The organization has developed over time to include 33 musicians who work together to generate better economic means to sustain their creative work, on an international scale. Though musicians and music itself are faced with some of the most difficult economic challenges in history, the struggle for artists who work with more forward thinking and experimental materials is even harder. The history of musician collectives organizing better systems to present and maintain their art include the AACM from Chicago and Instant Composers Pool from Amsterdam. Catalytic Sound is proud to be a part of that lineage, knowing that creative voices that work together speak louder and with more power than those in isolation. For more about this organization's work as a record distributor and music streaming service for its artists, and as a presenter, please visit [catalyticsound.com](http://catalyticsound.com)

Being asked to curate the 2024 edition of the Music Unlimited is one of the great honors of my career. My deepest thanks go to Wolfgang Wasserbauer for the invitation, to all the musicians who wanted to participate- those who can be in Wels this November and those who were unable to attend because of prior commitments- to Geert Vandepoele for their photo exhibition, to visual artists Dan Grzeca and Richard Hull for the Trojan Horse banner, and to the entire festival staff and volunteers. I have considered this opportunity and the program for the festival carefully. Those performing are a Who's Who of artists that have inspired me throughout my life: in the past, now, and who will certainly do so in the future. My deepest appreciation to all of them for the years of music they have shared with me.

-Ken Vandermark, Chicago, September 7, 2024