

## *The Catch-22 of Non-idiomatic Free Improvisation*

This idea of non-idiomatic playing involves ruling out all known “types of music,” so that music has no choice but to consist of some other sort of sounds and music making, the palette of which is potentially the entire audible spectrum. A truly new music! This concept came as a revelation to me, and I applied it to my playing with a diligence bordering on fanaticism.

Playing as far as possible outside any recognizable musical genre; consciously excluding any previously familiar subject matter and instrumental techniques in order to cultivate new musical languages.

For a year or more I tried to completely avoid plucking and fretting notes in any ways that I had already learned. I was unable to accomplish this fully however, first because once a new technique is discovered it becomes familiar (learned), and second because I was working six nights a week playing rhythm guitar in a soul band, “The Fantastic Salt and Pepper Band and Show.”

Paradoxical limitations aside, this attempt at conscious deconstruction and reinvention of my playing skills lead to (for me) new techniques derived from considering the electric guitar as a pure sound generator, which for some purposes need not even involve the strings.

In fact, this concept of reinvention is a hallmark of free improvisation, which partly accounts for the encompassing sonic potential it can generate.

Back to this “non-idiomatic” business: soon enough, the absence of idiom becomes an idiom. We ran into that problem after awhile: clichés of free improvising. Improvising groups that sound like other improvising groups. We sounding like ourselves.

In light of this inescapable development, “non-idiomatic” for me went from being an imperative prerequisite to being one of several cornerstone components of improvisation. It turned out that this exclusionary rule was problematic, since with improvising you never know what imagery you might need to draw upon.

Sonic collage, say, requires an openness to available images, many of which are musically quite familiar, even mundane. For me, music that I already know can be excellent source material, if it is transformed somehow. Music played from memory (song fragments, for example) can work well as elements in improvisation, being rich in malleable content and context.

Literally playing whole songs or arrangements is another matter. Dubious territory for me, since if I keep on playing songs, I’m no longer playing free improvised music.

Playing the known and/or the recognizable can work well on gigs; sometimes it’s fun to play a song. Sometimes it’s more fun—or less demanding—to play songs instead of improvising.

That’s a different gig. No matter what it sounds like, free improvisation comes from different brainwave patterns than song playing.

Judicious inclusivity; that’s the ticket.