



# Center for Jazz Studies

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## Film Synopses

### "Jazzin' The Black Forest" (2006). Elke Baur (Germany), director. 90 minutes.

Reminiscent of Ashley Kahn's "The Making of 'Kind of Blue'," this film chronicles the rise and fall of the German record label MPS, which during the 1960s and 1970s recorded an international panoply of artists, including US pianist George Duke, French violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, and important members of the German post-Emancipation generation, such as trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, bassist Eberhard Weber, and pianists Joachim Kühn and Wolfgang Dauner. The story is told in the context of a ceaseless quest of a German DJ for new material to remix, which results in his rediscovery of the label and its music. Along the way, the complexity of a jazz-situated cross-culturalism and internationalism is explored in depth, through retrospective interviews with musicians, engineers, and former record executives. The film includes rare (silent) footage of Canadian pianist Oscar Peterson, bassist Ray Brown, and drummer Ed Thigpen in a home recording session.

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### "Eric Dolphy: Last Date" (1991). Hans Hylkema, director (Netherlands). 92 min.

In the music culture of the Netherlands, Eric Dolphy is perhaps the most beloved American jazz musician of his generation, rivaled only by Thelonious Monk. Dolphy's extensive connections with Dutch musicians, including pianist Misha Mengelberg and drummer Han Bennink, performers on Dolphy's celebrated recording "Last Date," forms just one strand in this multileveled, Dutch-centered filmic remembrance of the great saxophonist. American musicians such as saxophonist Buddy Collette, trumpeter Ted Curson, pianist Jaki Byard, and bassist Richard Davis also present reflections on this unique artist, who died in 1964 as the result of a diabetic coma, a disease that, due to the lack of consistent and affordable health care in the United States (an issue that still rages in 21st Century America) he never knew that he had. The film's chilling first-person account of a German doctor's refusal to treat Dolphy shortly before his on-stage collapse in a Berlin club (in the race-infused belief that the musician was suffering from a drug or alcohol-induced hangover) recalls the fabled story of Bessie Smith's death after being denied entrance to a Southern hospital.

### "Misha Mengelberg: Afijn" (2006). Jellie Dekker, director (Netherlands). 77 min.

*Afijn* is a loving portrait of Dutch pianist and composer Misha Mengelberg, a leader of the post-1965 European jazz movement known as "the Emancipation," which turned away from imitations of American music in favor of combining jazz with the sounds of their own national and pan-European traditions. Mengelberg was the pianist in Eric Dolphy's celebrated final recording, "Last Date," and performed with virtually every American musician of stature who visited or resided in the Netherlands. But Mengelberg was also a part of the whimsical Fluxus art movement; an activist who founded a Dutch union of improvising musicians that still exists today; and along with Louis Andriessen, a leader of the Dutch classical composition scene. The film traces Mengelberg's life and work with other important Dutch, German, and American musicians, including his long-time collaborator (who also performed on "Last Date"), the drummer Han Bennink. The Dutch title, *Afijn*, can be imaginatively translated as "How sweet it is."

### "Irene Schweizer" (2004). Gitta Gsell, director (Switzerland). 75 min.

At least in the US, Switzerland may not routinely come to mind as a home for new ideas in jazz, but two Swiss figures who have had enormous impact in much of the world were the late writer Peter Niklas Wilson, who wrote extensively on Albert Ayler, Sonny Rollins, and Anthony Braxton, and the pianist Irene Schweizer, a product of 1950s Switzerland whose forthright and exuberant pianisms draw from Monk, Cecil Taylor, and the sounds of the Swiss countryside in equal measure. The film follows both the musical Schweizer (whose name simply means "Swiss") as she literally attacks the piano with hands, elbows, and feet, and the activist Schweizer who squarely confronts issues of feminism, the role of women (including lesbians) in new music and jazz, and the connections that Schweizer and other European women musicians made with the international women's movement.

### "Art Ensemble of Chicago: Swim, A Musical Adventure" (1993). Felix Breisach (Germany), director. 55 min.

Not a documentary per se, this film is nonetheless documentarian in its presentation of an unusual 1993 "Crossover-Projekt" among three modernist German composers, the Deutsche Philharmonie of Bremen, Germany, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose postmodern visual and sonic iconography is represented by their slogan, "Great Black Music: Ancient To The Future." The compositions are performed on the edge of an Olympic-sized swimming pool—hence the film's title. Though the film has appeared several times on German television, this kind of music-making is so rarely seen or heard in the United States that its presence on the Festival of Global Jazz enhances documentarian goals of the film festival as a whole.

### "On the Edge: Improvisation in Music, Part 1: Passing It On" (1992). Jeremy Marre, director (Great Britain). 55 min.

Part 1 includes a discussion of survivals and retentions of improvisation in Western classical music. We see organ improvisations in Paris, and Bailey's early introduction to a segment with Mozart interpreter Robert Levin, who discusses the historicity of Mozart as an improviser and performs a movement of a Mozart concerto with the improvisation left in. Gaelic psalm singing in the Scottish Isles, Indian singing with Pundit Hanuman Misra, and a segment on the music and thought of John Zorn, are juxtaposed with Douglas Ewart (who is performing on this festival), teaching children to improvise and create instruments at an elementary school in Chicago's Chinatown.

**"Chicago Improvisations" (2000). Laurence Petit-Jouvet, director (France). 83 min.**

The first of two documentaries by the anthropologist Laurence Petit-Jouvet tracing the first-ever US tour in 2000 by German bassist Peter Kowald, one of the important first generation of "post-American" (or "emancipated") European jazz musicians, as he seeks out instances of the black musical culture that he strongly acknowledged as central to his own creative conception. Along the way, Kowald encounters the social and economic dislocations endemic to working-class black life in the United States. The film documents Kowald's work with modernist and post-modernist musicians in Chicago, such as Chicago saxophonist and AACM original member Fred Anderson. While the film has been described as a "road movie" in the spirit of Jack Kerouac, some viewers may also find themselves comparing Kowald's developing impressions to Alexis de Tocqueville's 19th Century musings on a much younger America.

**"Off The Road" (2001). Laurence Petit-Jouvet, director (France). 72 min.**

The second of two documentaries by the anthropologist Laurence Petit-Jouvet tracing the 2000 US tour by German bassist Peter Kowald. The film finds Kowald performing with many of free improvisation's most important contemporary figures, such as the Bronx-born bassist William Parker. In early 2002, not long after this film was made, Kowald achieved a lifelong dream by securing an apartment in Harlem, which he regarded as the capital of black American culture. The joy that Kowald felt as he walked the streets of what he intended as his adopted home was transformed into tragedy when this widely admired musician, seemingly in the prime of health and creative power, suddenly passed away later that same year.

**"Sound?" (Roland Kirk and John Cage, 1967). Dick Fontaine, director (Great Britain). 26 min.**

In this film, the power of montage allows a virtual meeting that was unlikely to occur in real life, between the blind multi-instrumental experimenter Rahsaan Roland Kirk and John Cage, the architect of indeterminacy and, beginning in the 1950s, an outspoken critic of jazz music's supposed dependency on ego and will. Particularly arresting is the segment of the film where both artists are shown experimenting with tape-recorded sounds in their work, albeit from vastly different cultural standpoints, performance settings, infrastructural access, and conceptions regarding the nature and purpose of human expression. Kirk is seen playing three saxophones and a nose flute *at the same time* in counterpoint and homophony, while passing out whistles in a London club with the announcement that we will now play in "the key of W." Meanwhile, Cage, walking a bicycle across the stage, recites a text on the nature of sound in stentorian tones while his associate, David Tudor, operates a bank of recording devices.

**"Archie Shepp: 'I am jazz . . . It's my life' (1984). Franck Cassenti (France), director. 54 min.**

Franck Cassenti is one of the most prolific European directors of documentaries on jazz, and his work with Sun Ra, and this film are among the highlights of his oeuvre. In the midst of the developing proto-postcolonial consciousness that marked the jazz world of the 1960s, Shepp came to prominence as an articulate and passionate critic of the economic exploitation and cultural suppression of the African-American artist. The film presents a diverse array of Shepp's ideas and working processes on music, theatre, poetry, politics, and culture, and provides a unique glimpse into the reasons why some musicians choose the life of an expatriate.

**"The Leaders, Jazz in Paris" (1988). Franck Cassenti (France), director. 54 min.**

The ways in which the cosmopolitanism of the African-American musical artist becomes nurtured by working-class roots is highlighted in this documentary, shot by Franck Cassenti in Paris. On view are six musicians of diverse backgrounds and musical directions: saxophonist Arthur Blythe, a colleague of Horace Tapscott's communitarian, Los Angeles-based Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension; saxophonist Chico Freeman, trumpeter Lester Bowie and drummer Famoudou Don Moye of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, three off the many important musicians that emerged from the equally communitarian and internationally known Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians; Cecil McBee, the virtuoso bassist known for his work with McCoy Tyner, Keith Jarrett, Wayne Shorter, and Sonny Rollins; and Kirk Lightsey, a gifted, muscular pianist from Detroit who worked with McBee as far back as his Army days, as well as with everyone from Dexter Gordon to Damita Jo. As Lester Bowie joked about the diversity of experience on offer, "What do we call this kind of music? Schizo, I guess." Or postmodern.

**"On the Edge: Improvisation in Music, Part 2: Movements In Time" (1992). Jeremy Marre, director (Great Britain). 55 min.**

Part 2 anticipates the subject of the 1993 documentary *Latcho Drom*, which traced the evolution of gypsy music from its putative origins in the Sind region of today's Pakistan. This segment explores the effects of improvisation on culture as it migrates with human bodies across borders, continents, and oceans. Presented are examples of Hindu music in Rajasthan, Sufi *qawwali* in New Delhi, medieval music in Andalusia, gypsy flamenco music and dance, and the work of Latin jazz experimentalist Eddie Palmieri.

**"On the Edge: Improvisation in Music, Part 3: A Liberating Thing" (1992). Jeremy Marre, director (Great Britain). 55 min.**

Part 3's treatment of the links between jazz and other world musics is militantly ecumenical, and begins with Max Roach, teaching a class at the Harlem School of the Arts and discussing the importance of music as a spur to new consciousness. The film continues with New York-based Lawrence "Butch" Morris, whose innovative "Conductions," in which musicians improvised under the baton of an improvisative conductor with an extensive lexicon of gestures, have explicitly engaged interculturalism; the Korean court musician Sang-Won Park; and the sound sculptures of British artist Max Eastley. The work of pedal steel guitar legend Buddy Emmons is juxtaposed with the "shockability" of American guitarist Eugene Chadbourne, and Derek Bailey himself appears briefly, playing with British post-Emancipation violinist Philipp Wachsmann.

**"Jazz Tales" (1997). Albert Chimedza, director (Zimbabwe). 55 min.**

Director Albert Chimedza, himself an mbira performer, maker, historian, and curator through his Mbira Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, follows his band Gonamombe through a summer of performances at music festivals across Italy. Both the music and the conversations between the musicians explore the relationship between music and national identity, centering on the discourse surrounding "world music": Is the term merely a marketing tool for music megamedia, or can it be a symbol of intercultural artistic aspiration? The film also features a performance by Senegalese master Youssou N'Dour.

**"Unyazi of the Bushveld" (2007). Aryan Kaganof, director (South Africa). 45 min.**

The Zulu word "unyazi" can be translated into English as "lightning," an apt double image of rupture and new beginnings for UNYAZI 2005, Africa's first festival of electronic music, the brainchild of new music composer Dimitri Voudouris. Aryan Kaganof's documentary on this singular historical event is suitably non-linear in structure, as it explores the complex relationship, both assumed and actual, among technology, the African and Afrodiasporic worlds, and the multiculturalism that mediates them. We are presented with a vision freed from the romantically anti-technological stances of the early Négritude movement (and that of 1960s American black cultural nationalisms), and the concomitant assumptions that nothing of a technological nature can emerge from a black-ruled world. But we are never far from South Africa's recent history. Until this festival, jazz drummer Louis Moholo, exiled since the early 1960s, had never been on the campus of Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand—or rather, as he commented drily, "We came, but they chased us off with dogs. That was 1962."

**"Musicians in Exile" (1990). Jacques Holender, director (Canada). 75 min.**

Economic or political refugees? A question that haunts contemporary US political culture is also of vital importance to world cultural expression writ large. Nowhere are the myths of the purity of national expression and the integrity of the nation-state more at risk than in contemporary concert-halls, clubs, and the myriad spaces in which musicians, mediated by geopolitical struggle, exchange and assimilate sonic perspectives. This film traces the experiences of expatriates such as Hugh Masekela in New York, exiled from *apartheid* South Africa in 1960; the Chilean group Quilapayun, exiled to Paris in 1973 after the destruction of the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende and the rise of US-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet; the drummer Daniel Ponce, who left Cuba for New Jersey's Little Havana during the Mariel boatlift; and the saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera, who left the island in 1980 and

became an American citizen. For those who know her work, the pianist and composer Michelle Rosewoman, whose musical direction is strongly linked with Latin forms, appears in the film briefly.

**"Abdullah Ibrahim: A Brother with Perfect Timing" (1987). Chris Austin, director (Great Britain). 90 min.**

A canonically important film in South Africa, this portrait of pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (once known by the name "Dollar Brand") portrays the creative process of this most cosmopolitan artist in dialogue both with the streets of his native Cape Town, and the very different jazz world of New York City, one of the many regions to which he and a generation of black South Africans were exiled in resistance to the vicious apartheid regime that ruled the country until the re-emergence of Nelson Mandela in the 1990s sparked the transition to majority rule.

**"Elements of One: Steve Coleman" (2004). Eve-Marie Breglia, director (USA). 98 min.**

The music, ideas, and travel of saxophonist Steve Coleman (also performing on the Festival) is the subject of this documentary, with settings in Senegal, Cuba, India, and Egypt. Intellectually and culturally wide-ranging, but with roots in the Chicago South Side that produced the AACM and the soulful saxophonist Von Freeman, Coleman's work assimilates the sophisticated rhythmic methodologies of Cuba and India, the esoteric Egyptology of Rene Schwaller de Lubicz, the world of interactive computer music, in which area Coleman's work has proved highly innovative, and the esoteric astrology that was said to undergird the construction of John Coltrane's composition "Giant Steps." The importance of Coleman's itinerant Afrocentricism is highlighted right in the opening segment, in which he uses his saxophone to test the acoustics of a Egyptian pyramid.

**On the Edge: Improvisation in Music, Part 4: Nothin' Premeditated" (1992). Jeremy Marre, director (Great Britain). 55 min.**

The concluding Part 4 includes three very different views of the Afrodiasporic world of improvisation: mbira music from Zimbabwe, blues guitarist Buddy Guy, and performance research on computers as improvisors conducted by African-American musicians at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Jerry Garcia and The Grateful Dead explore what Garcia calls the "anti-authoritarian" aspect of improvisation, and a trip to Tonga is followed by a culminating party on New York's Lower East Side.

