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Mission Statement: The purpose of An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living is to provide a resource for the dissemination of creative works relevant to the subject of meta-living. The journal welcomes both academic and artistic exercises expressed in any medium capable of being transmitted through the physical mechanisms of the journal. Due consideration also will be given to submissions that do not conform to these mechanisms. The journal explicitly forbids the establishment of a regular publication schedule.

Meta-Living: One useful avenue leading toward an understanding of the term meta-living is through analogy, particularly by considering meta-fiction. Wikipedia, the oracle of all contemporary knowledge, defines meta-fiction as “the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.”¹ By straight-forward analogy, meta-living is the existential term describing a manner of living that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between existence and reality, using irony and self-reflection among other devices. These other devices include, but are not limited to, scientific inquiry, ontology, various theologisms, sophistry, rhetoric, tomfoolery, transcendental perspectivism and, of course, the omnipresent specter of post-existential relativism.

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction>, accessed 2014 April 16.

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A Note on the Font: This font is Dax Compact Regular, designed by the late Hans Reichel, musician, instrument maker and font designer.

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You Haven't Seen Everything Until You've Seen a Woman Playing Pedal Steel Guitar: An Interview with Susan Alcorn

questions formulated by David J. Keffer, June 30, 2017, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA
answered composed by Susan Alcorn, August 24, 2017, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Abstract: As part of the course, "The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation", offered at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, students are introduced to the music of non-idiomatic improvisers. Exposure to quotes from interviews with the musicians helps to frame the music in the musicians' own words, which builds a better understanding in the listener of the context in which the music was created and the message that the music is (or is not) intended to convey. In this vein, the instructor of the course posed ten questions to the American pedal steel guitar player, Susan Alcorn.

"One of the world's premiere musical innovators on her instrument, Baltimore-based Susan Alcorn has taken the pedal steel guitar far beyond its traditional role in country and western swing music. Known among steel guitarists for her virtuosity and authenticity in a traditional context, Alcorn first paid her dues in Texas country & western bands."¹

This interview with Susan Alcorn was conducted as part of the course, "The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation", offered at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in which students are introduced to the music of non-idiomatic improvisers, past and present.² The interview was conducted via email. The original query, framing the interview, is included at the end of this document in Appendix A. The ten questions are posed by the course instructor (DK). The answers are provided by Susan Alcorn (SA). In an attempt to acknowledge other sources that have been vital to the development of the course, where appropriate, the instructor provides acknowledgement to those

texts that inspired questions, which appear in this interview.

DK: Who have been and/or are formative influences in your musical vision? Why?

SA: I think perhaps that there are two kinds of formative influences (for a musical vision and for life) - music or art that one is exposed to, something that makes a deep impression that you connect with; and personal, perhaps private, influences from your life growing up which has an effect on how you relate to what you were exposed to. What makes someone relate to one style of music or an aesthetic over something else? The answers are subtle and probably unanswerable with words.

I grew up in a family where music was important (though a career in music was frowned upon). My mother played piano, mostly church music, and had at one time sang in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra under George Szell. My father was a talented mime, which was a big thing in the forties

and fifties - he could mime the popular big band singers of those days. So our house was filled with big band, jazz, and classical music. But then came rock and roll, the doo wop and pop singers of the fifties and sixties, the British Invasion, girl groups, etc. At that time I thought the music my parents listened to was the corniest thing in the world.

Growing up in the late fifties and the sixties, the radio was my guide to the world of music. There was something about the Beatles that drove us crazy - we just felt it in our young bones - maybe it was puberty and the newness of it all.

I liked the girl groups of the sixties and that kind of wall of sound Phil Spector approach to pop music. I liked folk music. I became passionate about blues

(something in those flatted 3rds and 7ths) - that expression of feeling.

I liked the British invasion groups and psychedelic music.

At an early age I began listening to 20th Century classical music especially Edgard Varèse, Olivier Messiaen, and Krzysztof Penderecki (especially Threnody - I actually met him and discussed music with him twice completely by chance - once I was sitting in a deli and he walked it, and another time I was in an airport waiting on my flight and looked over at the man sitting next to me and realized it was the maestro). The same things I liked about psychedelic music, I liked in their music - it had an edge to it that somehow I viscerally related to.



Susan Alcorn - photo credit: David Lobato

I first heard John Coltrane shortly after he died when an “underground radio” station (as most FM stations were back then) played “Invocation to Om” from the “John Coltrane: His Greatest Years” album – this was the “later” John Coltrane. I felt that there was something in this music that was similar to what I would want to express.

I felt the same thing when I finally heard Ornette Coleman.

I saw Astor Piazzolla and his quintet perform in 1987, and that made a deep impression.

Also, Pauline Oliveros was a friend and a huge influence - her Deep Listening approach to music was, to me, a revelation.

I’m also affected by the music of Mercedes Sosa (to whom I dedicated a song), Violeta Parra, Víctor Jara, Silvio Rodríguez - the nueva canción music of South America and the trova music of other parts of Latin America. For some reason, they just strike a resonant chord in me - perhaps it’s the soulfulness of much social struggle in Latin America and the world. I feel the same about Leonard Cohen’s “The Partisan”.

Also . . . Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra, Dusty Springfield, Morton Feldman, Albert Ayler, Paul Bley, Muddy Waters, Paul Butterfield, Jimmy Hendrix, Albert King, Patti Smith, Arvo Pärt, The Supremes, The Beach Boys, Karen Dalton, Tammy Wynette, Roberta Flack, and the steel guitarists Buddy Emmons, Lloyd Green, Jimmy Day, Barbara Mandrell, Curly Chalker, Joaquin Murphy, Maurice Anderson and Tommy Morrell, among many.

DK: In what way (if any) do your experiences with country music prepare you differently to collectively improvise in creative music with collaborators who hail from other traditions?

SA: Country music is quite different from most of the music I play these days, especially improvised music. In jazz, to put it in shorthand, most solos (in

many ways, the heart of jazz) are played in relationship to the melody and a set of chord changes. When you get into free jazz, it’s often based on melodic relationships - horizontal rather than vertical (vertical being the stacked notes that comprise chords). In free improv, and the improvisation that goes with the music I write, you are bound by neither chordal nor melodic relationships - the connection is more subtle and can, at times, go off in tangents based on a number of factors - how or what you are feeling, the audience, a sudden urge to go off into something different, and in my live shows, no urgent need to wrap up a song by returning to the melody at the end. Songs leading to songs; songs within songs, a shared journey.

The best of country music is simple, direct, heartfelt, and honest inside a rather strictly defined form. Whereas a jazz soloist might play a solo for 96 bars, or free improvisers might improvise for 25 minutes, a solo on a country song is short and to the point - maybe four bars, eight or sixteen bars. In that way it is similar to haiku - you go outside the boundaries, and it is not haiku anymore. The beauty is working inside structure, and in its simplicity. I think country music teaches me that in all music, it has to have a certain feeling - it has to speak, in some ways directly, to an audience.

DK: From 'Amazing Grace' to the 'Heart Sutra', your music makes explicit reference to spiritual matters. What is the relationship between spirituality and improvisation, and what does it mean to you? (Question inspired by Garrison Fewell.³)

SA: This is not an easy question for me to answer. Amazing Grace is, of course, a well-known gospel song, and the Heart Sutra is based, literally word for word, on the text of a Buddhist sutra. I think spirituality and improvisation (and it all music) is important, and maybe that’s what people relate to - it takes you into a place where maybe, for a moment anyway, you experience something, a depth of feeling that in some way transcends (but

never leaves) the mundane. Sometimes this can be approached with notes, sometimes with the space in between the notes, sometimes with silence, and sometimes with noise.

DK: Many musicians define improvisation in unique ways. For example, Lê Quan Ninh writes, "Improvising is not so much breaking free from time as it is breaking free from the means of measuring it." What is improvisation to you? (Question inspired by Lê Quan Ninh.⁴)

SA: Ninh said that? Well, I would agree; if time doesn't exist in the way we think of it, perhaps we need a different way of approaching. I believe, in improvisation or composed music, to allow the notes to breathe, to tell their story. In the same way, listen to the instrument and let it tell its own story.

In solo improvisation, you are in a constant relationship with the concept and reality of formlessness - the void. I'm searching for words to express what I mean by this, but I can't come up with any - it's just a feeling I have. Sometimes I'll have mental images, a memory, a feeling of a color, and I feel it when I play (though I do this in composed music as well).

For group improvisation, the dynamics, in my humble experience, are different. With the group improvisations I've been a part of, we don't talk about the music before we play (and when I toured with Ninh, we purposely did not talk about it afterwards - it was what it was and when the last note died out, it was over). So you're sitting there, or standing, in silence (in other words, not talking), no melody or structure to lean on. You have to respect each other, listen to each other, anticipate, move along with the ebbs and flows of the music, and engage both sides of your brain - the right brain for the intuitive, the sort of just let it happen feeling, and the left brain for knowing when to change ideas. To me, improvisation is an act, an art, or deep communication - you don't play for the

lowest common denominator in an audience; but you play for them to hopefully get something out of the experience, something that is probably different for each listener. Of course, you play for yourselves of course (something that sounds good to you), but the main point is expression.

DK: Joëlle Léandre has said, "Women in the field of creative music are often forgotten. They don't get called much. They become known thanks to their work, their anger, their personality." Have your experiences as a woman been different in the field of country music and creative music? Do you have advice for young women pursuing creative but unconventional avenues? (Question inspired by Joëlle Léandre.⁵)

SA: I don't have much anger, and I think my personality is pretty unexceptional, though hopefully my work will reach people in some way. There are difficulties being a woman in music, just like there are difficulties being a woman in all walks of life. When I started out, it was often difficult to be taken seriously by male musicians. There was a lot of patronizing, at times in country music, male musicians would sort of try to put me in my place, but I worked really hard at what I did, and when somebody would try to play over me, I'd play circles around the exact notes they played, and usually they wouldn't even know it. There was, and perhaps still is the attitude that a woman in a band should in some way function as eye candy. Women who were young, thin, and conventionally attractive were featured in bands, but when, as will happen to all of us, we are no longer young, thin, or attractive, there's less use for us, especially in pop music.

However, I think things are changing. Musicians like Mary Halvorson, Sylvie Courvoisier, Zeena and Andrea Parkins, Ikue Mori, Ingrid Laubrock, and many others are being appreciated by male musicians and by listeners in general for the brilliance of their music. I think music has just changed with the times. I remember my grandmother telling me how certain careers were

just closed for women when she was young, but the world has changed, and it's changed the same way in music. However, chauvinism and misogyny are still very much alive, and I still run into people around music (especially some non-musicians in the business as well as a few "fans"), and at times I still notice a sort of "boys' club" approach to things.

Two personal experiences:

I was on the bus of a well-known country singer, and he said, "A woman playing steel guitar - now I've seen everything."

Thirty-some years ago in Houston, Texas, I was playing in an old dance hall. A woman with her maybe five year-old daughter walked up to the bandstand, stood in front of me and said, "Look there, sweetie - a steel guitar player. A *woman* steel guitar player!"

I'm not sure I'm the best one to be giving any kind of advice, but I would tell young women pursuing unconventional music to believe in themselves, believe in their visions (and allow those visions to change through time)

DK. What do you imagine the future of creative music to look like? (Questions inspired by Lloyd Peterson.⁶)

I can't imagine, nor will I try (unless my hunch is right that musicians of the future will play mentally beamed music in purple tutus and basing in on the mating calls of dolphins and muskrats). It's enough for me just to think of the present moment, and music is a very present moment kind of thing - you're in that moment, and the split second your mind wanders to the past or future, it's gone. Music, especially improvised music, is by nature ephemeral. That said, the younger musicians coming up today, as a whole, know their instruments better (because of improvements in music instruction) that many of us who came up basically teaching ourselves how to play and what to play. They are also exposed to music (youtube, streaming media)

in a way that was unheard of when I was growing up, especially outside of major cities.

Sometimes I think of modern music being directly related to the machine age and the impact these sounds have on our psyches; and I (perhaps naively) think of current electro-acoustic music as being related to the computer sounds we hear, and the constant stream of digital beeps and blips, all in that digitally precise time.

Also, I at times I wonder if musicians in the future might eventually go beyond the world of ones and zeroes and delve into waves and the physics of subatomic particles (which, like all particles, may turn out to be nothing more than waves themselves or perhaps just collections of infinitely smaller and smaller particles.)

Where this all leads to will be an exciting adventure.

DK: Do you try to impart a message through your music? If so, what is it? (Questions inspired by Lloyd Peterson.⁶)

Hmmm. I don't think there is a certain message I try to impart, or at least one that can be described with words. However, in a performance or in a recording (which to me, I guess are pretty much the same thing) I am, of course, hoping to express something, a mood, sometimes the memory of a feeling, an outlook on life, and, in rare instances maybe something unspoken that transcends all of this.

DK: Do you have a philosophy or some way of looking at life that you would be willing to share? (Questions inspired by Lloyd Peterson.⁶)

My philosophy of life is not really different than that of most people. On my better days, I hope that I am kind, compassionate, and loving; respectful of the world around me. In life I've always tried to follow

my muse wherever it takes me and try to be real with myself in that context.

DK: You revealed your talent for story-telling in "Texas: Three Days and Two Nights". Can you share an anecdote that illustrates what makes music vital to your life?

SA: I don't know. But I'll share a story perhaps related to that. Quite a number of years ago, during my early years in Texas, I was in Houston and a country band I was playing with had a gig in Jasper, Texas, a town in the East Texas piney woods close to the Sabine River and the Louisiana border. It was a long drive, so I had to give the bass player, someone who I didn't care for as a musician [as you can see, I haven't been kind and compassionate all the time] or as a person. I drove to his mother's house (he was a musician - of course living with his mother) to pick him up. I had to wait about a half an hour for him to get ready and grab his bass and amp. While waiting in their living room, I talked with his mom for a while. She said that her son was different from all of her other children. They were able to get jobs, careers, have families, but Ronnie was different - he always had a love for music and that's all he had ever wanted to do. He was just like me (except for the part about him being a lying, backstabbing, sniveling suck-up poor excuse for a bass player).

DK: Do you have any recent, current, or upcoming projects you would like to talk about?

SA: For the past few years I've been busy with other people's projects. In 2013 and 2014 I worked on, performed, and recorded the compose Jeff Snyder's pioneering work for pedal steel guitar and string quartet, *Substratum* - some of the most difficult music I had ever played. Then in 2015 until present I've been busy with the music for the Mary Halvorson Quartet. I've also done quite a bit of touring as a solo musician.

A few months ago I recorded a duet album with California saxophonist Phillip Greenlief. That music is something I'm excited about. Also, in a few weeks I'll record an album with Saxophonists Joe McPhee and Ken Vandermark - I guess we'll see what happens with that. And trumpeter Nate Wooley has a recording project that I'm looking forward to. I have some ideas for a solo album and hope to record that sometime late this year or early next year depending on time constraints.

Other Sources

There were two other questions that we originally formulated, but did not ask here, because we found answers to these questions in other, previously published interviews. For the interested reader, the questions and links to the corresponding interviews are provided below.

"What led you to become interested in generating 'creative music' (aka non-idiomatic improvisation) (or substitute other term of your preference)?" This question is answered in the interview by Spencer Grady in *The Quietus* (2010).⁷

"What led you to the pedal steel guitar?" This question is answered in the interview by Kevin Macneil Brown in *Dusted Features* (2011).⁸

For additional information visit the Susan Alcorn website at <http://www.susanalcorn.net/>.

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About The Poison Pie Publishing House

The Poison Pie Publishing House⁹ is an independent publisher specializing in post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational writing process. In addition to serving as a publishing house, PPPH hosts an arts blog⁹ and “An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living”.¹⁰

Appendix I. Interview Request

Dear Ms. Alcorn:

My name is David Keffer and, for the past six years, I have taught a course at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville titled, "The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation". The course is available to first-year students and is intended to not only expose them to musicians and music of a sort they may never have heard before but also to get them to think critically about motivations for pursuing creativity in unconventional directions.

I am scheduled to teach the course again this fall semester. Over the summer, I am preparing. The course format is simple: each week the students have listening homework--one hour of a single musician--then we discuss any aspect of the music in class that week. Some musicians that are important to the message of the course, like Evan Parker and George Lewis, I include every year. Others I rotate in and out of the course. This fall I plan to include your music in the course. In addition to the immediate appeal of your music, I am trying to include a diverse group of musicians, in terms of race, gender, nationality and background, better reflecting the diversity of my students. You have a fairly unique background, coming from country music, in the field of creative music. I thought you would be a good choice because, when I included Amina Claudine Myers, whose background is Gospel, my students really enjoyed her mixing of Gospel and improvisation. (Many of them have grown up playing music in Tennessee churches.) I think your music and background may likewise have broad appeal to my students.

The reason that I am writing to you is that my ability to relay the messages of non-idiomatic improvisers has been greatly improved over the years by studying interviews with and books about or by the musicians. In particular, I have found the collected interviews in "Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant Garde" by Lloyd Peterson (2006) and "Outside Music, Inside Voices: Dialogues on Improvisation and

the Spirit of Creative Music" by Garrison Fewell (2014) to be incredibly insightful. To facilitate discussion, I often take quotes from these sources and display them on the projector during class.

I have found a few interviews with you on the internet. I have begun assembling some relevant slides. But I didn't find answers from you for some key questions covered in Peterson's book and other sources. To this end, I would like to send you a few questions to answer at your leisure. If you are agreeable to this suggestion, please let me know and I will send ten questions. You would, of course, be free to answer whichever questions you preferred and in whatever medium--written, audio or (in the tradition of Derek Bailey) audio with improvisational accompaniment!

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Keffer

p.s.

The course website is here:

<http://utkstair.org/clausius/docs/fys129/index.html>

The "notes" link will take you to the page where I have posted the track-listing for the listening homework and the powerpoint slides to date.

If you are curious as to what tracks I included for an hour of Alcorn listening, that sheet is posted. If you have alternate suggestions, please share them.

2017: The Year of the Every-Day Magician

or

A Second-Hand Account
of the Rise and Fall of the Renegades
of the American Muslim Registry

by David J. Keffer

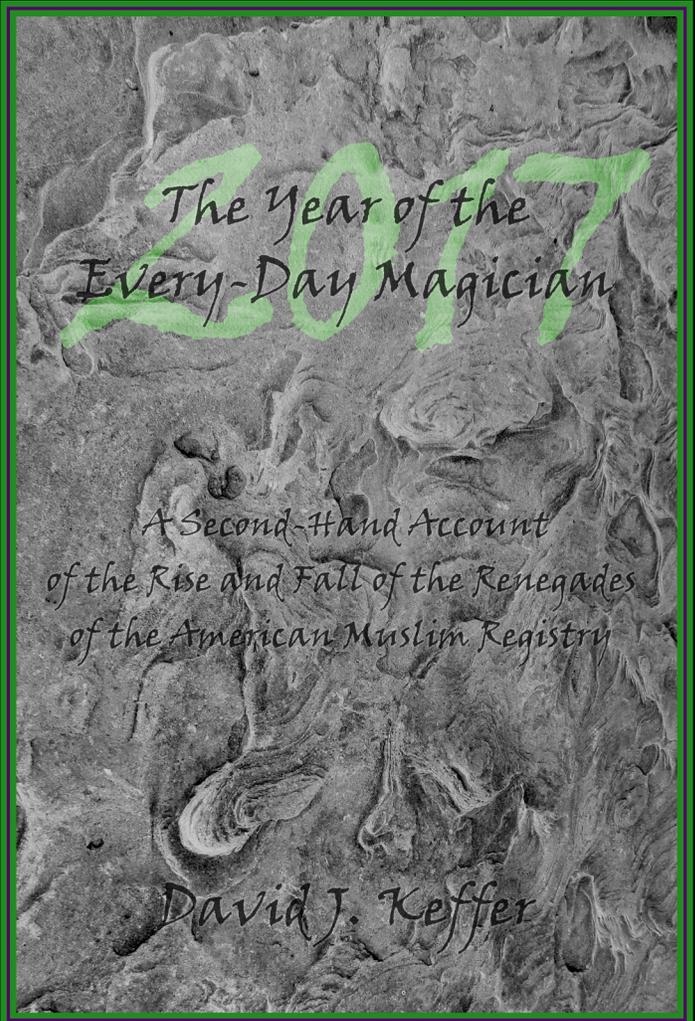
The novel follows two neighborhood boys, Oscar and Omar. Oscar is a member of a family that could be described as white working class and one whose fortunes are in decline. Omar is the son of first-generation immigrants, professionals from Iran. These two boys navigate a friendship in the social landscape reflecting in real-time the political events of 2017 and the social tensions created by the current president and his policies.

2017: The Year of the Every-Day Magician is a post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational creative process. The novel is being serially published one day at a time in 2017. When complete, it will consist of 365 short passages, one composed for each day of the year. The writing appears on the same day as it is generated on the website of the Poison Pie Publishing House. This novel is read as written.



About the Author

David Keffer is a professor at the University of Tennessee and an autodidact in the realm of world literature. He has currently published 23 novels, 6 illustrated books and 2 prayer books with the Poison Pie Publishing House.



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