

The Past Sure Is Tense
A Conjugation of Now in Four Parts
By John Corbett

Part 1: Now Was the Time

Time's arrow is strung across the bow of the present.

In order to be propelled into the future, it must first be drawn back into the past. The apparatus of temporality incorporates all three elements into its mechanism. They are unified. As our tips prepare to fly forward, our tail feathers mingle with the elders.

I remember a now. It was 1986. Ken Vandermark was playing with his Lombard Street Trio at a little club called the Willow in Somerville, Massachusetts. He had longer hair then, and he played more bass clarinet. The approach was a crude version of what Vandermark would develop, what would lead, step by step, from the Vandermark Quartet to the Vandermark 5 eventually to today's Edition Redux. It was embryonic, but it was definitely his music.

That now was a time. The 1980s. It was a period of great stirring, much of it in combinatory mode, compiling the lessons of previous generations, even lessons that had already themselves been based on the lessons of the past. Let's say the Henry Threadgill Sextett or the David Murray Octet or Anthony Davis's Episteme or Butch Morris's conductions or Julius Hemphill's various groups or the Joe Morris Trio or the Fringe. All of them played in Boston around then. Each was deeply rooted but also wholly present in that moment. That version of now.

I remember listening to European improvised music with Ken. Introducing him to it, in fact. It was a powerful now, for us in the context of all that incredible American music. The way it expressed its difference. The continuities they shared. To see them both as part of a continuum, a spectrum of musical identities. The contrast between European free improvisors' acute notion of self-responsibility, their emphasis on collectivity, on interaction, their interrogation of idiom, and the Stateside concentration on coordinated movement, on authorship, on personal narrative, on heritage. Beneath all of that, a whole host of nows jostled for space. The all-encompassing now of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the AACM. The intermediary now of Frank Wright, Sonny Simmons, Steve Lacy, Carla Bley, Clifford Thornton, and Joe McPhee. The blank-slate now of Brötzmann, Schweizer, Mengelberg, Bennink, Pukwana, Schlippenbach, Yamashita, Sakata, Lytton, Parker, and Bailey. The singular now of Milford Graves. The generative now of Ayler and Trane and Cecil and Ornette. The alternative now of Tristano and Giuffre. The Newk-now of Sonny Rollins.

Here we are, pulling back the bow. We can flex it a little further.

Part 2: Now's the Time

When Charlie Parker named his tune "Now's the Time," bebop was calling for a distinctive kind of immediacy. It was different from the now of Max Roach's *Freedom Now Suite* or the implied now in Ornette's *Tomorrow is the Question*. In turn different from McPhee's *Pieces of Time* or Bailey and Tony Coe's *Time* or the Ex's *History Is What's Happening* or Refused's *The Shape of Punk to Come*. Parker's was an existential kind of now, one that turned inward, asked to be taken seriously, posited an absolute starting point, posed questions about tempo and

temporality, about the function of speed in the experience of nowness. It was a breathless now. An eternal present. A now unto itself. An affirmation in advance of a confirmation, not yet an excursion on a wobbly rail.

Let's understand that this now business is not all relativism. One now might be categorically different from others. This now is *not* that now. Now is finicky, temperamental, a bit of a prima donna. It doesn't want to be confused with another now – that's tacky or nostalgic or both, one now posing as another. But now does necessarily glance backwards, touching on the nows before it, however independent it wants to seem. Time frames necessitate this – nows overlap via personal lifespans. Bird's predecessors were still alive. Some still kicking. Hawk and Bean and Klook were very much in business. Still testing the relevance of their now.

Whose now was that time, really?

Part 3: Now Will Be the Time

Yes, Captain Beefheart, it's true, the past sure is tense.

But the present is tense, too. Perhaps the present is the most tense. We live in a time with bruises behind its eyes and gauze in its ears. In creative music we feel it as a kind of pressure, an ultimatum to stay relevant and also to keep one eye looking over your shoulder. That's what Ken has done at Music Unlimited 2024. He's observed the relevance of the present, proposed its connection to the living past, and predicted its endurance in some as-yet indeterminate future.

The future. The other tense.

The current moment will be a defining span. We will very possibly look at it as a pivotal period – its shifts in information technology, whatever we do or don't learn from AI in an arc towards Kurzweil's singularity, the perils of global warming, food insecurity, corporate terrorism, rising tides of fundamentalism like those of a potentially autocratic United States. Will it be a defining span in creative music? Will the music meet the challenge of being present for present tense? Of facing forward? The musicians this year at Wels say yes. They affirm that the place where present tense meets its horizon is going to be all that and more.

Part 4: Now Will Have Been the Time

In the act of painting, Amy Sillman has written, "You have to simultaneously diagnose, predict and ignore the past, present and future, all at once; you have to remember and to forget at the same time."

Nowness, first level:

Contemporaneity – a reality in which divergent things coexist in time.

This is our current collective now. Bigger picture. What is creative music today? Free improvisation, structured improvisation, free jazz, through composition, conceptual & minimal & experimental & electroacoustic music, songbooks and song forms. None of them dominate. They all happily cohabit, as they have for several generations of now. Valid methodologies and approaches, combined or left to their own devices. In the future, assuming there is a future, contemporaneity will have been our hallmark. The Vandermark program respects this multifarious now, this now of Gush and Paal Nilssen-Love's Circus and the Ex and DKV Trio, of Han Bennink and Jaribu Shahid and Lotte Anker and Mariá Portugal, of Christoph Kurzmann and

Sachiko M and Damon Locks. There is no dogma on Ken's shoes. No ideological purity. Multiple method man. This is heterodoxy in action. A now that, in that imagined and hoped-for future, will have been the time. A time when the arrow's feathers mingled directly with the elders.

Nowness, second level:

Extemporaneity – a quality of stepping outside of time.

Everyone performing on these stages, and perhaps sitting in the audience, will seek to experience this. The time is not now, as in, looking around at all the varieties of creative music making possible at a given point and choosing between them. It's not about eclecticism. There's no time for that circumspection. The immediate present has a gun to its head. Now is the time, to the exclusion of all else. The profound experience of right-this-fucking-moment. Performance requires such absolutism. Nothing else exists, just what is there in that instant, nowhere else, nothing else, whether the music is written or remembered or made up on the spot. Look back at those most memorable creative music performances you've attended. They are part of their present, but they stand apart from it too. Now's the time, we feel, and soon enough, as the past becomes our tense, now will have been the time. It always is.

Coda

One question for this now: can it revisit some of the fierce urgency and exclusivity of bebop, of Albert Ayler, of free improvisation – take no prisoners second level nowness – without jettisoning the heterodoxy that is its generation's birthright?

I've had the honor of watching Vandermark grow over the course of nearly 40 years. We booked nine festivals together in the '90s and early aughts. I've seen him organize other such programs, and he has always approached the task with the seriousness and dedication he puts into his own music. Same here. What a lineup, Music Unlimited 2024. Observe time's arrow, feel the tension as it is drawn back – youth meeting elders, brush of feathers, method vs. method – and then, with each release of the cord, watch that sucker fly.