endangered species

alvin curran
Endangered Species states, restates, correlates, instigates, inflates and deflates, elevates, formulates, disintegrates, interrogates, percolates, granulates, germinates, Kiss Me Kates, Tom Waits, Norman Bates and W.B. Yeats, horripilates, adumbrates, prestidigitates, sophisticates, enumerates, integrates and contraindicates songs from the standard repertoire, Standards they were called. Old French, Frankish, estendard “place of formation”. If you asked a jazz musician what he played, he’d probably say Standards and Originals. Standards being popular songs from Broadway or Hollywood, Originals being compositions written by the jazz players themselves. They became the catalysts for infinite extended play.

Around 1950 Alvin and I, two midcentury boys in our Hebrew natural Anglo baloney dilemma wondering what might be up further in an utter out, began to learn these songs from early albums by Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan, Stan Getz et al, and tried playing them on dance gigs in Providence. A lot of frantic faking of course at first, using Combo Orks (simple charts) and eventually more official fakebooks. Plus we started weekly jam sessions using my father’s Steinway. Just piano and drums. A tape was made by a long vanished schoolfriend and what we wouldn’t give. . . !

Two memorable early “appearances”: Alvin’s accidental trombone modulation on La Cumparsita with the teacher/pianist madly modulating to find and lead him back. And the day a fellow drummer and I assembled a pile of all the noisemakers we could find, quickly departing from the short written “solo” included in the kiddy tune, with never any intention of returning to the score. No memory of what it sounded like or how it ended, if it ever really did end? But I do recall that the junior high student reaction was suitably fractious. The rules had been scissored! A breath of the free in the land of the trapped. We were just forced to improvise.

And one overwhelming concert by the Dave Brubeck Quartet at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1954. Alvin and I were used to one or two chorus solos on 10-inch LPs before the longplay scene was in full extension. But the Brubecks were taking ten or twelve choruses mostly at medium tempos. Paul Desmond’s alto pushing the melody into the furthest reaches, Brubeck pressing the chords until they yielded what
seemed an endless array of alterations. At which point you could almost forget the source tune. A music never anticipated but more as if they were chasing something always just beyond the reach of each successive chorus. And now it all went vast on us and, all attention, we rose in sudden salute, total regard. We stared at these men. This was serious improvisation. The Brubecks wholly opened all the tunes, making us feel that need.

Things changed a lot in the sixties, prepared by events and discoveries in the fifties. Alvin and I felt born at the right time. There was a lot of fresh ground and the methods for digging it. Not a lot had been said/written about all this yet. A good time to get serious about personal art. I began to take my first goofy steps beyond the outlands of authorized American poetry, shedding single syllables on our great bland forspacious skies. Just as Alvin in his early Italian hours began the passage from highest compositional instruction of Elliott Carter Yale to basic tape recording in a vast overboard search for almost prehistoric sound. He began to dream and plan celestial orchestral structures out of kidcry pussyhum tincan faucetry, which fed him into the arena of live free electronic concerts with Musica Elettronica Viva, an aggregation founded on finding fitting pieces from the shattered daily zeitgeist. Everywhere there were amazements in bursts of monstrous breakdown, all-out discovery worldwide.

And the jazz players began to lose the song and blues forms in an adventure to advance new momentaries in an animate void. Soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy: “It was a process that was partly playing tunes and playing tunes and finally getting to the point where it didn’t seem to be important and it didn’t do anything for you, to play the tunes. So you just drop the tunes. And you just played.” But the songs were still lurking at the edges.

Similar to how the painter Philip Guston’s late figures reemerged from fields and years of free plasticity. Alvin’s standards rise from an uncodified potential of all the sounds in the world. Recognizable but reformed by what had been worked through the nameless sound fields into a strange new life, now audible here.

This poet reacts to the tracks:

Isn’t all music from Out of Nowhere? Originally a ballad by Johnny Green who also wrote Body and Soul. Lombardo and Bing had hits with it in 1931. Coleman Hawkins recorded it in Paris in 1937. Charlie Parker again showed his genius with Bill Port’s D.C. big band in 1953 when the second chorus modulated out from under him. Tristano wrote a memorable head for it, 317 East 32nd Street. Paul Desmond endlessly reconceived its melody on Brubeck’s college tour 1054. And Warne Marsh died soloing on it in L.A. December 18, 1987 and there may be a tape! Alvin’s version lands in a plain of open piano, with a tuxedo of flying Tatum flourishing finish. A sense of one thing left to say. A focus on the crusts of song memory. But it’s all in the connective tissue. Plus a tonic amen, just to settle it.

Confessin? Well, I’ll give a plugged rug. Or is it a cocktail gig with a side of construction zone? The disaster plate humming in some spare distance. Probably actually an account of the World’s Greatest Pileups? I love the ultragorgeous confusion of that’s that, all those precision edges and we go AH! Once and for all resolving a vast and furrowed by so many of us complexity. Confessin? Inventive!

Alvin’s at the back of the jammed Whole World Room here. Maybe next to a candied cardigan spread muezzin? Wallering along and this time Ain’t Misbehavin, another ballad from Keep Shufflin. It’s a string of captures à la Curran, one you know from the first two notes. Imagine a version by Samuel Morse himself. A bridge to scratch-rap and the tonic hiccup, tonkytonk recoupled, can’t escape total music space. There’s a boomslang loose in here? A roarpeggio finally. A tiff at tar speed. Hymn to a Car Crash? SCRAMBOLA! Fats often cracked wise to coda his songs. Like, you empty the tune and these words fall out. All in all a hypnotagogic lingo stretch in recent arrivals that end gospelish. So now it’s safe to land your piano.

Bewitched Bothered and Bewildered. Bedazzled Bedraggled and Bewidened. Pal Joey in 1940 when they included the risqué verses. Betimes. Be Swift. Be drug. Be waited for. Be tended to. But hey this piano’s good! Now a reverb tomb of ice cream favors. A two-brain model and the laugh’s on you. Down to Astaire on ice picks, virtuoso of the carpal
needles. A piano tuner mantra. I don’t think I know.

Why didn’t Spike Jones do this one up? Dim Lyrics? Starts with 13 A-naturals in a row. But you see it later cresting down the block, where Steve Lacy intrudes with his fog horn. You were saying? Sad enough. Art Blakey did a Moanin version. A song by Harold Arlen who was always learning the blues. No strain to catch this oceanic gloss. Not a drill. Come Rain or Come Shine. But no choice, really.

Duke’s Got It Bad from his Jump for Joy barely staged in Hollywood 1941. That jump of a ninth in the first bar shows it was written for instruments. The Tentative Allstars leaning in and don’t spare the head tones. I got it. You said it. A song that gives “good” a rest and then and there you find Duke’s ghost. Like Giant Steps, every note a chord change, or Brubeck’s the Duke, natch, or Scarlatti in encaustic, but who left all that Lilliput in? A grain-prone scratch continuance for a stretch to the purple deeps, those little blue collapse notes. Let’s get lost in the tune. But just does the way it should, coal down the chute, a Blue Providence, only to cease behind brown blinds, blown changes. As ever, resolving to SILENCE. Got a spare?

Speak Low, all 56 bars of it. Alvin arranged a memorable choral version for the Pembroke College Chattertocks in the late fifties mist. Then he wrote (!) an Ivesian assemblage of Brown U songs that got played once during a rainy football game. But now we tango to, how many bars to go? Here you can hear the clockwork innards.

Arrividerci Roma by Sigman, Giovanni, Gavenei and Fishman, that parade of names having faded to a good evening in Italian where the footsteps talk to each other and they keep building Roma, those cogged centuries, keep repeating farewell in jazzed notes. Piano strings stretched to the Antonioni nightbreeze trees witnessed by Vitti and then everybody. Out there is where. Crestfallen. A disturbed Walter Lantz cartoon fading . . . So goodbye already!

Tea For Two as if it just flew in, childishly. But Shostakovich made an arrangement got him in trouble with the Kremlin. And Horowitz recorded the song the same day same studio as Monk cut one down the hall. What a day! This song deserves its quartertone accompaniment as things fall from shelves in time. Wouldn’t you? Well you needn’t. A sonata for lazy voice and hungup pianist? But it was Tatum’s showpiece in 1933. Django reworked its harmony in 1937. Brubeck’s perfect ascending bop head for it in early fifties. Not to mention Anita O’Day’s light speed takeoff at Newport in 1958. And I’m dreaming that this is a tune written never by nobody! A seemsong.

Herman Hupfield writes When Yuba Plays The Rhumba On The Tuba At Time Goes By. All lit out in bassdrum bones. Watch out! It might end! But it’s only the bridge where Bogie cast his cigarette. Polly want an answer? More Dooleyman algebra. Else it’s Curran Live at the Birdhouse Roger Williams Park Zoo in 1952. Amidst all those virtuoso jolts and calms. No! Not that key! It goes by all the keys.

Now it’s 1930 and Hoagy’s downstairs with Tram helping with his Georgia. They’re thinking 19th century? Have to get their imaginations restored, restrung? Gentlemen, start your virtual hoods. Saucers on the morning phonepoles. They finally have to give the song up to pastures of gone-on-forever. A chart to where yodels were born.

St. James Infirmary? The real hospital was in London not New Orleans. English ballad tradition, a love song to a corpse (!) with entry neon buzzers. Blues Back By The Window, alternative title. For tooth caps and keyboards. Sidling into an industrial siding. That Pizza & Food sign in Cementon NY on a poetry fieldtrip. Ulterior musicbox and how it goes? With madhouse matchups, Snake Pit in L-beams, loom streams. I went around. The world in a plane? Alvin again ends on open piano, as if to show clear source. This song led Cab Calloway to Minnie the Moocher in 1930. It was Jack Teagarden’s signature tune.

A Foggy Day, the Gershwin staple was born to A Damsel In Distress via Astaire in 1937, the year George died. Alvin takes it out for an ahem as a waking sentient being, then bells it further into a sample of Industrial Monk, his micro hesitations extended into Memories of. . . Or Spike’s next step: melody and sound effects simultaneous? It’s a shutdown stomp. Born again to Marian McPartland on Hickory House 52nd Street with Joe Morello tipping lightly on steady brushes. Brubeck already disked it with a bassoon (!) in 1952. Mingus’s workshop version has band members aping traffic sounds. Then born once again to Red Garland with Paul Chambers and Art Taylor in 1956, while with Miles. Showing that the tempos had advanced in the fifties as
the jazzguys gave such songs a second life. The originalists opposing the slightest alterations shouldn't have worried. Alvin with no anxiety puts his pedal to the atmosphere.

Here's The Curran as Robert Thought on the Eightyeight. Then Benny on Eubie with Alvin, and here come the Memories (Of You), gigs by the Backroom Boys all over. Almost the 19th century again? He's old fashioned. . . but nobody can ever wait and a fight breaks out. Then off. Some songs have the tendency, tenacity?, to dismiss themselves. They somehow know they'll be back. Endless versions already stacking up and raring to enter whatever successive era. Jazz makes out on this year's model, etc.

Louis Armstrong's take with Lionel Hampton introduced the vibes to recorded sound in 1930. Originally a German song, Schön Gigolo by Carsucci and Brammer, English lyric by Irving Caesar who also wrote the words for Tea For Two, Swanee and Umbriago with Durante. Just A Gigolo, known to us jazz wiseguys as a frequent piano-alone piece of Monk's most public years, probably waiting for the drummer to show? You mean, Monk didn't write this?! Like that. Just a mini-aria on radar, used to warn when they were getting too close to the melody in Progress Hornsby's band. This piano's a keen machine or box of gizmos. Overboard on a Seize Cruise, where you got production families, and hey, every sight on Earth was already on the ship, my dream. A sad oldworld tune requested by many blustering barristers. Sir Francis Gas, attention! Monk brought it back to rebop on those stored frugal vectors. Alvin pieces it out in clamors.

Red River Valley was written by whomever and then you just bare your teeth, Carl Sandberg claimed. Backed by the Sons of the Can Openers, incurring the myth of everybody, including John Ford, the 101 Strings and the Boston Cops. It's an American songbag of average changes left from a prairieman's tickytock heartburn. You know it. When only your partial habits are displayed, displaced, and farm class is all you have left to aspire to, winking at the fossil melodies, touch of a ditch. Turns into an A-Train coming for you. A handfull of tongs, planetary weights. But that right turn to Clementine's Canyon was only a leftover. Whistles by Lomax. Banjos by erasure. A few sunset suds. The first and last tune ever to be cut. Out.

And one more thing as Alvin suggested to me the other day. A way of letting the songs themselves have the last words.

A foggy day as time goes
like I got a shine to love you
rain out of nowhere ain't misbehavin
just that I love you had as a gigolo
down by the valley infirmary so long

And so our implanted spacecraft enhanced standpoints do return sounding an incessant later on.

—C.C., Petaluma 27IX18

Clark Coolidge grew up with Alvin in Providence, playing drums in early bands with him. More recently they have collaborated, words and music, over the years. Though better known as a poet (his latest book is Poet from Pressed Wafer, 2018), he continues as a drummer, in recent duos with Thurston Moore, and the free jazz band Ouroboros.

Composer's Note
Growing up white just after WWII, a Jew in the midst of euphoric middle-class power tools, everything was just around the corner. First came the Torah then came the FakeBook. After my Bar Mitzvah, I ditched god for the existential, became a home-grown gardener and a jazz pianist, and joined Local 198 of the American Federation of Musicians—Amy Triangolo presiding—then it was one lounge, one dive, one frat-house, one hotel, one cruise ship, one club after another. They ate, they drank, they danced, we played. The musicians were mere stagehands in a mindless, reckless, chaotic drama, set in a continental-size vat of alcohol. But the songs, oh those songs . . . they told everything like it was; they made love sound ineluctable. The crowds listened and couples shuffled, slid, whirled, jitterbugged, and moaned to their own Broadway dreams of moonbeams and sunsets and surries with fringes out of nowhere coming up roses, blackbirds, nightingales, and pages in a book.

In a few decades the American song—genuine art-song as good as Schumann’s “In Wunderschönen Monat Mai”—had grown from its popular blues roots
into a musical language and heritage for the whole world. As a kid, I faked the whole lot from the big book daily . . . and as an adult I kept going back there, like great poems, to abolish despair, to remember a utopian age forever on the way, like an augmented 11th chord that never got resolved except in the 43rd Coltrane chorus of “My Favorite Things.” While in the meantime I pursued a life in un-popular music—a musical sidecar from which these very songs would sprout from time to time like patches of wild arugula. One of the luxuries of aging is you can peruse the decades like a Farmers Almanac—check the weather predictions and planting times, listen to whole prairies singing, imagine all the hurricanes stop short of Martha’s Vineyard, look at maps with no foghorns where states are not yet born, mulch the timeless standards piled on the piano. My father urged me to stick with the piano so I would have something to fall back on. . . . I fell right into it, and have no intentions of being rescued. Did Cecil, did Monk, did Charles Ives?

The Yamaha Disklavier was the instrument I was waiting for . . . a grand piano which allowed me the luxury of playing not just its own hammers and strings but my entire archive of sound-files: a magic act where the whole world becomes audible directly from my finger tips—an 80-proof blend of analogue and digital. The selection of songs on this recording is mostly ballads, slow and easy, leaving me time to think, exit into unverified neighborhoods, begin a piece from the end, enter a spontaneous museum of dysfunctional harmonies, sneak out the back door into the cocktail mists looking for traces of MEV street music in a heap of Pistoletto’s rags.

Among the accidental sounds you hear are:

Broken plumbing in the Mills College Music School men’s room, fireworks, Inuit women throat singing, a basketball bouncing, Pavarotti singing a high C, an Austrian yodeler, the Nantucket Lightship foghorn, Kurt Schwitters’ early Dadaist Ursonate, canned laughter, Spike Jones, the chief Muezzin of Baghdad, wolves howling, giant industrial doors closing, elk in heat, chimpanzees chattering, kids screaming, Indian singers doing bols, Steve Lacy, creaky floors, an accordion riff, a wailing women’s minor riff in Tajikistan, a cheap car-crash sound effect, aborigines’ stick rhythms and singing, a wall of electronic oscillators, cicadas from the Andaman Islands, a mad rhythmic water pump in Burma, choral unisons, Shelley Hirsch’s harmonics, Butch Morris’s solo valses, Fred Frith squawking, Zu, Khlebnikov’s Pom Pom. . . Marclay’s scratches, Xenakis’s Tetrap plushes, bison mating, piano tuning, the Queen Mary’s shiphorn, hoopoes, Jon Rose’s electric violin, bus driver raps, kick drums, Sardinian canto a tenore, deep elephant rumbles, the Turkish rapper Cеза, Zorn’s sax screeching, the New Delhi train station, Scelsi in Italian, Punch and Judy show, didgeridoo, Scottish bagpipes, Palestinian shofar, various Wire Tapper appropriations, dropping stones, children’s toys, tobacco auctioneers, John Cage: “Why are you so contemporary?”, bluegrass banjos, Allen Ginsberg, Mike Cooper’s slide guitar, Thomas Lehnh’s VCS3 synth, barrel organs, trains coupling, a stadium buzzer, humpback whales, Berio’s trombone concerto, Sofia Gubaidulina’s string quartet, Malcolm Goldstein, the Brooklyn Bridge, Mongolian yodelers, Victor Cavallo’s Roman monologue, Edith Schloss reading in German, Demetrio Stratos: “ladies and gentlemen”, Alowys Bücher yodeling in the Zurich train station, a horse-drawn carriage on the old Appian Way, Olga Neuwirth’s parquet floor, Susan Levenstein calling to a goatherd near the Via Amerina, Sabina Meyer’s vocal improv, Aurora Josephson’s improv at Mills College, Jew’s harps, Tibetan throat singing, bull roarsers. None of which have much to do with the sophisticated melodies, chords, rhythms, words, and worlds of Duke Ellington, Kurt Weill, or Cole Porter, except for allowing me the luxury of speaking through them.

—Alvin Curran, Rome, September 19, 2018

Alvin Curran has realized a long and fruitful career as a composer/performer/installation artist, writer, and teacher in the American experimental music tradition. Born in Providence in 1938, he studied with Ron Nelson, Elliott Carter, and Mel Powell, and co-founded the group Musica Elettronica Viva in 1966 in Rome, where he currently resides. His music, whether chamber works, radio-art, large-scale environmental theater, or solo performance, embraces all sounds, all spaces, and all people. He has taught at Rome’s National Academy of Theater Arts (1975–1980), Mills College (1991–2006), and the Mainz Hochschule für Musik (2011); published extensively on music, his own music,
and other artists; clocked thousands of live performances and has a discography of more than thirty solo and sixty collaborative recordings. A book about his work, *Alvin Curran: Live in Roma*, was edited by Daniela Tortora, and *The Alvin Curran Fakebook*, an illustrated compendium of mostly notated pieces was published in 2015. Recent highlights: *On Hearing the Brooklyn Bridge Sing in Yiddish* (2010/2015); *Circus Maximus* for 17 musicians, electronics, plus video by Theo Eshetu (2011); *Toss and Find* for the Trisha Brown Dance Company (2011); *Maritime Rites New York* for brass bands in rowboats (2012); *Harvard’s Elson Lectureship* (2012); *Symphony 1.1* (2012); *Circus Maximus* for 17 musicians, electronics, plus video by Theo Eshetu (2011); *Toss and Find* for the Trisha Brown Dance Company (2011); *A Banda Larga* (Broad Band), a street symphony (2018).

Best-known works: For *Cornelius, Hope Street, Tunnel Blues*, and *Inner Cities* for piano; *Schtyx* for piano-violin-percussion trio; *Electric Rags* for saxophone quartet; *Oh Brass on the Grass* for 300 amateur brass-band musicians; *Crystal Psalms* and *Maritime Rites* for radio; *Toto Donaneschingen, Gardening with John, Shin Far Shofar, and Piano de Pian* sound installations; solo performance pieces from *Songs and Views from the Magnetic Garden* and *Canti Illuminati* to *Endangered Species*.

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For additional writings, and much more, please visit www.alvincurran.com.

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Just a Gigolo: Original German text by Julius Brammer, English words by Irving Cesar, music by Leonello Casucci. Published by GEMA, Chappell & Co., WB Music OBO Irving Caesar Music Corp.

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80804-2 [2 CDs]
Alvin Curran (b. 1938)
Endangered Species
Alvin Curran, Yamaha Disklavier

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3. Ain't Misbehavin' (1929) 16:55
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4. Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered (Take 3) (1940) 10:28
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5. Come Rain or Come Shine (1946) 14:05
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