



# A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation

By John Corbett



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Improvisation rattles some listeners. Maybe they're even suspicious of it. John Coltrane's saxophonic flights of fancy, Jimi Hendrix's feedback drenched guitar solos, Ravi Shankar's sitar extrapolations—all these sounds seem like so much noodling or jamming, indulgent self-expression. “Just” improvising, as is sometimes said. For these music fans, it seems natural that music is meant to be composed. In the first book of its kind, John Corbett's *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation*

provides a how-to manual for the most extreme example of spontaneous improvising: music with no pre-planned material at all. Drawing on over three decades of writing about, presenting, playing, teaching, and studying freely improvised music, Corbett offers an enriching set of tools that show any curious listener how to really listen, and he encourages them to enjoy the human impulse—found all around the world—to make up music on the spot. Corbett equips his reader for a journey into a difficult musical landscape, where there is no steady beat, no pre-ordained format, no overarching melodic or harmonic framework, and where tones can ring with the sharpest of burrs. In “Fundamentals,” he explores key areas of interest, such as how the musicians interact, the malleability of time, overcoming impatience, and watching out for changes and transitions; he grounds these observations in concrete listening exercises, a veritable training regime for musical attentiveness. Then he takes readers deeper in “Advanced Techniques,” plumbing the philosophical conundrums at the heart of free improvisation, including topics such as the influence of the audience and the counterintuitive challenge of listening while asleep. Scattered throughout are helpful and accessible lists of essential resources—recordings, books, videos— and a registry of major practicing free improvisors from Noël Akchoté to John Zorn, particularly essential because this music is best experienced live. The result is a concise, humorous, and inspiring guide, a unique book that will help transform one of the world's most notoriously unapproachable artforms into a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“I wish I had this book twenty-five years ago! A hyper-insightful and thoughtfully organized book that also happens to be thoroughly entertaining, *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation* is an essential read for anyone interested in the complex yet accessible world of musical improvisation.”

(Glenn Kotche, drummer and composer, Wilco)

“Corbett is one of my absolute favorite music writers because he has the rare ability to combine two diverse strains of this benighted craft, bringing together the deep musicological knowledge, heavy-lifting reportage, and crystalline prose of Peter Guralnick with the unbridled passion and joy of Lester Bangs, even when he's writing about a topic as allegedly difficult as improvised music. He never fails to open new vistas for this music lover, and he is guaranteed to do the same for you.”

(Jim DeRogatis, cohost of Sound Opinions)

“This book is a small marvel. A deceptively simple guide, it is clearly the product of decades of serious listening. There are few books—about any form of music—that pack more ideas and more insights into such a short space as this one, and yet it remains light, lithe, immensely readable, enjoyable, and practical. It is an excellent, accessible introduction to an art form that is notorious in its reputation as difficult listening.”

(David Grubbs, author of *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*)

“A much-needed book for the open-minded listener—a well-written volume from jazz critic John Corbett—and one that's bound to widen your ears to a whole new realm of listening! The book's pocket-sized—maybe so that you can sneak it into a club when visiting a free jazz concert—and it's written in a style that's both personal, but very directive—with a full understanding of the complexities that come into play when listening to improvised music, and a guide towards facing some of the more difficult challenges involved! Corbett clearly loves this music, but without any sort of high ideals—none of the too-cool-for-school modes that are usually standard with the avant garde, and instead this very down to earth approach that shows the listener that they've got all the tools needed to enjoy the music themselves. The goal here (one we can totally endorse) is to bring the listener face to face with new and challenging sounds—but in a way that allows them to instantly contextualize them too—yet without having to carry years of jazz or musical experience into the process. The book is divided up into easy-to-digest sections—and penned with a surprisingly warm style too.”

(*Dusty Groove*)

“It took me years and lots of listening to understand free improvisation, and in the beginning Corbett was a big help for me. This handy book breaks down the basics of free improvisation, a theoretically non-idiomatic practice where musicians get together with nothing planned and simply make music spontaneously, focusing on interaction and largely dispensing with the qualities we expect in music—fixed structure, melody, regular rhythms, standard harmony. Free improvisation is about sound and interplay, though that doesn't quite sum it up. Corbett mostly does without name dropping and jargon—he designed his book for the novice, and he takes pains to keep things clear and approachable, even if what he's writing about is anything but accessible to most listeners.”

(*Chicago Reader*)

“The perfect example of what any field guide to music (or any other art form) should be. Small enough to fit in a pocket at barely over 4” x 6”, the book is a practical guide for those new to free improvisation, though there is plenty of information for an experienced listener to pick up something new. . . . This book will undoubtedly be useful to anyone who is interested in improvised music or even music in general. These listening techniques could easily be applied to most forms of music. It would be nice to see this book be adopted as a text for music appreciation and history classes. I wish this book had been around when I started listening to and performing free improvisation. This is an essential text for the next generations of listeners.”  
(*Burning Ambulance*)

“A refreshingly pragmatic book. . . . As a primer, it’s a valuable guide and even seasoned listeners will find it useful to be reminded what distinguishes free improvisation from other music and the kinds of things to which they should be alive.”

(*Free Jazz Collective*)

“Lays down a golden road to understanding free improvisation. . . . *A Listener’s Guide* is, essentially, and in the best way possible, a popular how-to manual from a master who has spent years in the field. Reading Corbett is like spending an afternoon with your favorite uncle and his cabinet of booze. By the end, you won’t necessarily know the names of the different bourbons, but you’ll know what tastes good.”

(*MAKE*)

“It’s hard enough to put music into words, but even harder when it’s created without preconceived plans. Kudos then to John Corbett for his insight into how one can gain deeper understanding of and appreciation for such music.”

(Tom Greenland *New York City Jazz Record*)

“It’s hard enough to put music into words but even harder when it’s created without preconceived plans. Kudos, then, to John Corbett for his insight into how one can gain deeper understandings of and appreciation for such music. Written in a pithy, metaphor-steeped style, Corbett’s book is humorous and engaging; he’s having a bit of fun with a subject about which he cares deeply. Fond of enlarging on his metaphors, as when he shows the various ways the book is like a field guide for birdwatching, he’s equally content to string a series of mixed metaphors together, thereby acknowledging the imprecise nature of such allusions, all merely parts, hints, of the bigger ‘truth’ he wants to illuminate.”

(*New York City Jazz Record*)

“*A Listener’s Guide to Free Improvisation* expertly navigates music that can seem thoroughly foreign and intimidating. Yet Corbett handles the material with grace and humor, intelligence and curiosity, in prose that unlike some writing on the subject, is easy to read and accessible to everyone. . . . a strangely soothing read, finding beauty and order amidst seeming chaos like a Zen master who describes a blade of grass bending but not breaking in the wind.”

(*Spectrum Culture*)

“Corbett has been listening to free improvisation for years and beyond that, has organized shows, curated festivals, and even engineered recording sessions for the music. Now, with *A Listener’s Guide to Free Improvisation*, he has attempted to build a bridge to potential listeners by writing a kind of guide for the perplexed on how to listen to music that doesn’t follow the conventions of ordinary song. . . . The advice he

offers is practical and illuminating.”—*Perfect Sound Forever*

(*Perfect Sound Forever*)

About the Author

**John Corbett** is a writer, producer, and curator based in Chicago who has written extensively on jazz and improvised music. A regular contributor to *DownBeat* magazine, he is the author of several books, including *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* and *Microgroove: Forays Into Other Music*.

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Cesar Smith:**

Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Yes, you can choose the suitable activity regarding spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book called A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation? Maybe it is to get best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with its opinion or you have different opinion?

**Ronnie Correa:**

Do you among people who can't read gratifying if the sentence chained inside the straightway, hold on guys this specific aren't like that. This A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation book is readable through you who hate those straight word style. You will find the information here are arrange for enjoyable reading through experience without leaving actually decrease the knowledge that want to supply to you. The writer associated with A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation content conveys objective easily to understand by a lot of people. The printed and e-book are not different in the content but it just different such as it. So , do you continue to thinking A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation is not loveable to be your top record reading book?

**Joseph Robison:**

A lot of people always spent their very own free time to vacation or even go to the outside with them household or their friend. Are you aware? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you would like try to find a new activity this is look different you can read some sort of book. It is really fun for you. If you enjoy the book that you just read you can spent the whole day to reading a e-book. The book A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation it is very good to read. There are a lot of those who recommended this book. These folks were enjoying reading this book. In the event you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book from your smart phone. The price is not too expensive but this book offers high quality.

**Elizabeth Villalobos:**

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