



Jazzforschung heute. Themen, Methoden, Perspektiven

herausgegeben von Martin Pfeleiderer
und Wolf-Georg Zaddach

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Wolf-Georg Zaddach

»Groove is the essence of my music«. Wayne Krantz' guitar playing from a practice-based perspective

Abstract (English)

Wayne Krantz, an US-American fusion jazz guitar player, developed a very personal style. Besides conscious reflection on his career and development, he came up with individual exercises. In the article, the stylistic development and the processes behind will be investigated and reflected from a practice-based artistic perspective. By doing so, the approach of practice-based and artistic research is realized with an autoethnographic approach, which appears to be a fruitful method, and presented with two individual but intertwined streams of narration.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Wayne Krantz ist ein US-amerikanischer Fusion-Gitarrist, der im Verlaufe seiner Karriere einen individuellen Personalstil entwickelt hat. Der Artikel verbindet eine Untersuchung der stilistischen Weiterentwicklung Krantz' mit einer autoethnographischen Erprobung seiner Übungsansätze, ein methodischer Ansatz, der vielversprechend für Practice-Based Artistic Research erscheint, und demonstriert zugleich die Vielschichtigkeit und Komplexität individueller Reflexions- sowie musikalischer Entwicklungsprozesse.

Wolf-Georg Zaddach

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Jazz guitar playing since the 1960s/1970s offers a wide range of playing styles and aesthetic orientations (Boone 2003; Waksman 2010). One of them is the fusion of jazz with rock and other styles of popular music as demonstrated by influential guitarist such as John McLaughlin, or Al DiMeola. Guitarist Wayne Krantz (*1956), active since the mid 1980s. During his career, Krantz developed a very individual approach of improvised music based on jazz education and his experience with contemporary rock and pop music styles.

In the following, I will introduce aspects of Krantz' playing and conceptual thinking from a practice-based perspective.¹ By doing this, my aim is not only to explore the personal style of Krantz but also to integrate practice-based insights and observations into the academic process of reflection and articulation by making use of the method of autoethnography.² Hence, I structure the article in descriptive expositions on the one hand and sections with personal reflections on my learning processes as a guitarist on the other hand (unjustified). Guitar performance practice is my primary focus, while the aspect of interplay and group improvisation will not be analyzed in detail.

Zooming in

When I first learned about Wayne Krantz during a guitar workshop back in 2011 I was amazed by his playing as well as his funky, and rock-

1 About practice-based and artistic research, see Burke (2017), Till (2017), and Doğantan-Dack (2015).

2 About autoethnography, see Ellis et al. (2011). This method appears to be promising especially for practice-based artistic research, since one goal of the approach is to »disrupt the binary of science and art« (Ellis et al. 2011: 39).

influenced style. At this time, at the age of 26, I had been playing guitar for about 13 years. When I began playing guitar, I was fascinated by rock and especially heavy metal. Soon, I started to explore other musical styles, especially classical music, but also music of the 1960s and 1970s, and jazz. The gateway to the latter was mainly Al Di Meola's as well as Herbie Hancock's fusion albums – for a rock listener often a very associative sound –, also Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, and recordings by the jazz guitarist George Benson. The variety of musical expression in jazz music amazed me, consequently changing my aesthetic perspective to the point that metal's heavy distorted power-chords started to bore me more and more. (It was only until just a few years ago that I re-discovered the aesthetical value, qualities and diversity of heavy-distorted guitar sounds.)

When I listened to Krantz' »Whippersnapper« (*Two Drinks Minimum*, 1995) for the first time in 2011, I had already gone through the typical path of academic jazz studies: learning the vocabulary of earlier jazz styles, as well as aspects of improvisation, composition, theory, and history. It may have been because of my earlier passion for rock and heavy metal that I felt amazed by the powerful playing of the trio and instantly connected to the familiar sound, since Krantz often uses effects such as delay, overdrive or distortion. Yet, his playing strikes me as being more complex and polished than that of typical rock, metal or fusion players – still groovy, somewhat edgy, sometimes very modern, and yet cool and casual in style.

Born in 1956, Krantz' interest for playing the guitar started first with rock music of the 1960s and 70s, in particular bands like The Beatles, Zeppelin and Jethro Tull caught his attention (Frost 2015), as well as Jimi Hendrix later on. His interest for the guitar led him into studying at a university. After graduating from the Berklee College of Music in 1985, he moved to New York City and became an established fusion jazz guitarist, who was able to master funky guitar-playing and post-bop improvisation in high tempos, performing in bands of Billy Cobham, Carla Bley, Leni Stern and such (Summerfield 1998: 207).

According to Stuart Nicholson, jazz rock and fusion had partly become commercialized during the 1980s »favor[ing] rampant virtuosity, the cute cadences of pop music, and nonthreatening electronics« (Nicholson 1998: 304). A vast amount of technique books and tutorials in

guitar magazines and on VHS appeared, reacting to the high popularity of the »shredding guitar hero« in rock and heavy metal and the increasing amount of guitar players (Obrecht 1984; Walser 1993: 57-107; Waksman 2010: 238ff.). One possible result – a widespread fetishization of technique – has been publicly criticized, for instance, by Vernon Reid, an established African-American fusion guitar player and founder of Living Color: »What I question are guitarists who use technique to make themselves invincible – an »I'm going to blow you away with my chops'« attitude.« (cit. in Waksman 2003: 128) The wide-spread playing of fast scale-runs and licks, of which players »are all guilty (at least sometimes)«, as Berklee guitar tutor Mick Goodrick puts it (Goodrick 1987: 96), may have been one of the reasons that challenged Krantz' thinking and playing attitude. In his first solo recording, *Signals* (1990), Krantz »revealed a solid guitarist and composer«. His remarkable development though can be recognized with his live recording *Two Drinks Minimum* in 1995, when he already »avoided the trap of dissolving into speed and power clichés« (Nicholson 1998: 248). He continued to develop a personal playing style that is highly informed by postbop's harmonic complexity as well as rock music's groove-driven energy – an unusual kind of fusion or jazz rock. In that sense, Krantz indirectly fulfilled what Jerry Coker listed in his 1987 edition of *Improvising Jazz* in the appendix as »Aesthetic Criteria for the Evaluation of a Jazz Artist«,³ obviously aware of the need of such criteria for younger players in those days: »originality« and »intellectual energy«.

»What am I going to do: Am I going to try to sound like somebody?«
About the ongoing development of a personal style

After my first Krantz-experience, I started to dig further into his music and thinking. I was most impressed by his understanding of what creative contemporary music could look like. Especially his ideas on personal style and the convergence of different musical styles and genres appealed to me. I think this especially was a revelation to me as a young student: that my own creative musicianship is »allowed« to connect my musical

3 Those are »Choice of Materials«, »Emotional Content« and »Versatility«, »Taste«, »Originality« and »Intellectual Energy« (Coker 1987: 81f.).

socialization of rock and heavy metal with the richness of musical expressiveness in jazz. That reveals quite something about my limited self-confidence as a player back then, but also about the at some times overwhelming aspects of music education. Krantz' rather profound and reflection-based attitude went with a changing approach in playing the guitar. I started to practice Krantz' way.

In the following I will explore further the characteristics of Krantz' practices and exercises that exemplify his alternative thinking and practical adaptation ideally. From the mid-90s onwards, Krantz guitar playing became – in general – more dense and complex in terms of texture, rhythm, dynamics, and phrasing. His personal style can be defined by the extent of rhythmic complexity and the harmonic richness, the creative development and connectedness of phrases and the use of differing sounds (not only, but mainly on the guitar) – both in composition and improvisation. They all are results of rather conscious reflections about his own as well as contemporary playing. During his studies at the Boston College of Music during the first half of the 1980s, he focused a lot on (classical) composition (Frost 2015), a fact, that obviously influenced his conceptual thinking.

He described his change of perspective several times. Part of this seems to be often his self-positioning within jazz and its boundaries:

I (...) call myself jazz musician still because I improvise and I associate improvisation with jazz. But the language of jazz, the vocabulary, I found myself less and less drawn to (...). I'm kind of relying on the spirit of what created that language to determine what I play. (Krantz 1999, 0:27–0:50min)

The great importance of improvisation lies for Krantz not only in the moment of creation, but also in the communicative aspect. That seems to be the core and at the same time the point of departure of his critical thinking about playing jazz nowadays:

There's a certain truth to improvisation, it's the truth of the moment. Right now, you say something, and if people are listening to you and other musicians that are playing with you – a group of people can commonly agree upon one way of looking at the world, just for one moment. And to me, the creation of improvisation is what allows that and that's a little different from playing a vocabulary, because a vocabulary more suggests something that we already agree on. We already love bebop and we know bebop is great. So, if somebody plays bebop it's affirming what we already know.

(...) It's a little bit different from trying not to relying on a vocabulary so much and just try to say, it's going to be a certain kind of groove and let's try to make something happen spontaneously. It's sort of a different way of approaching the music and the guitar, but that's what I do. (Krantz 1999, 2:15–3:20min)

Krantz' explanation of improvisation being the core of jazz is, of course, a personal reading – he could have related improvisation to other genres as well. Krantz understands himself as a jazz-educated musician and attempts to legitimize his approach as part of jazz discourse, with improvisation as the most unquestionable common ground. His reference to bebop, which usually is one of the most important topics in jazz education, is especially of interest here. He continues to acknowledge that he »deliberately turned away from all the melody (...), harmony and rhythm that [he] loved (...) to try to come up with something else«. He explains that he had to acknowledge, that a certain playing style and music have been made once (and still is being made), not without demonstrating his awareness of jazz history and playing skills on the guitar. During the masterclass, he continues to ask:

What am I going to do: Am I going to try to sound like somebody? I'm a grown man. Why would a grown man try to sound like another grown man or a grown woman like another grown woman? It's more like, we grow up and have our own things to say. (Krantz 1999, 7:36–7:50min)

Krantz questioned his former artistic standing and vision fundamentally. On different occasions, he explained his artistic decision eloquently from a rather practical point of view:

For a while I sounded like a cross between Pat Metheny and Jim Hall. I had a Mike Stern period, too. But when I moved to New York in '85, I purged myself of everything and everyone and started over. (Raegele)

In fact, the influence of Pat Metheny and Metheny-like licks can be heard in his solo improvisations (Williams 2016: 120f.), as well as the influence of postbop playing, namely chromaticism, chromatic approaches, the extended harmonic repertoire that includes symmetric scales, harmonic and rhythmic superimposition, bitonal- or cluster-chords (especially by playing chords with open and fingered strings at the same time). The usage of such bi-tonal chords on the guitar was, of course, used before Krantz, for exam-

ple by free jazz-guitarist Sonny Sharrock, and became a standard playing repertoire.⁴

For Krantz, an important characteristic of his playing lies within the context of groove and rhythm, Groove, he explains, »is the essence of my music« (interview with the author). He acknowledges that he has always been fascinated by rhythm in general and that he understands rhythm as melody (Krantz, 3:10–3:15min, 27:30–27:35min). Groove unfolds within a 4/4- or 3/4-measure, which provides beat accents, he explains. The frame to organize rhythms though is the pulse of 16th-notes, a multitude of an one quarter beat (interview with the autor). For Krantz, there is a certain quality of groove when music creates friction, tension and release, rhythmically (Krantz, 26:00–26:30min). He describes the the creative process of developing such qualities as »rhythmic imagination« (Krantz).

For me personally, going through the lessons of playing bebop have been rather stressful back then. I was fascinated by the music, yet it felt too far away from my personal musical experiences and the music I wanted to play. I understood that if I want to play postbop convincingly I had to understand bebop. Back then, this was my only motivation, until I learned from Krantz that I can create and play ›my‹ music incorporating bebop, for instances. The logic of his metaphor – learning a vocabulary so that you can alter, modify, even modernize it – convinced me personally.

His approach of creating modern chords and interval combinations resonated with my growing interest in music theory and offered me a concrete application to the guitar. One of such example is the ›zone-exercise‹ that will be discussed in the following section.

Learning and practicing strategies

A seemingly inexhaustible source of creativity seems to lie within Krantz' perspective on learning and practicing. Krantz practices in a way that appears to be a creative task. He attempts to constantly invent and shape exercises with a certain musical or aesthetic goal (Interview with the author).

4 Regarding postbop improvisation strategies see Terefenko (2014), Waters (2011), Liebman (2006), and Weiskop (1993), among others.

By doing that, he not only practices certain scales, chords or rhythms – an advanced task that requires a certain level of expertise. As exercises in general, his method follows the logic of limitation as a strict framework for creative explorations. Such limitations would be a certain spatial limitation, a particular zone on the guitar fretboard. In an interview, he made clear that even the name of ›zone‹ is on purpose and a reflection on widespread guitar teaching methods:

I call it a ›zone,‹ because when you say ›position,‹ people tend to think of the scale patterns they already know, in certain positions on the neck. What I do is more an exercise in, ›Can I find the right notes here?‹ (Levy 2008)

An example would call for the guitarist to play within the range of four frets only, with one fret for each finger, so that he forces himself to play without a change in the hand's position. Stretching the index finger and the pinkie, a conventional technique in guitar playing, is not allowed. This approach helps him to play more consciously, and unlearn practiced scale patterns:

You're necessarily going to leave out notes, which means you're going to have to think, and not just rely on what you know about a scale pattern. Don't stretch out of the zone – not even for a note that's part of the structure or sounds good – or else it's wrong in terms of the exercise. (Levy 2008)

A result would be that one can only play certain notes of a scale or extended chord within such a zone, and will most likely not be able to play the scale as a simple sequence. Yet, Krantz does not aim for the player to simply memorize the available notes in such a zone for ›real improvisation‹. Rather, zones are places on the fretboard that contain the potential to reveal new sounds and possibilities:

It's like, ›I don't know this – at least not as a pattern,‹ and I prefer it that way. By practicing using all these things that I don't know but can find quickly, I get better and better at finding them. It's working towards having access to all of the possible formulas. And, within that context, trying to be as musical as possible. (Levy 2008)

The crucial point here is that he attempts to break his ingrained mental processes and advance on the guitar with challenging new exercises:

I could map this out to try to remember it and get good at playing it fast. That's how I used to practice scales. It's how most of us are taught, but I found it really hard to apply that to actual music making. Also, I was always limited to only being able to play what I'd practiced. So I decided to forget

that whole bit of trying to remember stuff and getting fast at playing up and down and all that. Instead, I practice trying to find any tonality in any zone, and I make that search as musical as I possibly can. (Levy 2008)

The ›zone-exercise‹ is a rather difficult exercise. Though playing within a certain ›zone‹ or range is typical for a beginner within the concept of a ›position‹, most often of a pentatonic, Krantz' applied ›zone-exercise‹ is very different. It requires advanced playing skills and fundamental knowledge of theory.

It really forces me to consciously think about the ›right‹ notes and thus the correct finger, and fret. While playing with a metronome, it sets a specific pressure to play fluently. While playing, I can consciously ›feel‹ my ›musical brain‹ working and processing: »What are the possible notes on the G-string, if I want to play the G melodic minor scale in the 7th zone (meaning index finger on the 7th fret)? Oh right, I can play only two notes here, if I strictly follow the rule and resist stretching my index finger or pinkie.« I recognize that I need a moment longer to answer that question, in contrast to playing the same scale in the traditional way, using alternate picking, stretched fingers and a moving hand – all according to muscle memory developed over years of repetitions. It took me a while to get used to this way of thinking: I somehow feel that my theoretical knowledge about the shape of the scale and its tones is re-connected and renewed, and that my ears are attentive in a different, focused way. The exercise quickly forces me to consider and re-evaluate the qualities of each tone and interval combination I can make out of that zone.

For Krantz, practice is not complete without self-evaluation. He records short exercises of himself playing with a metronome, an approach which the Berklee guitar tutor Mick Goodrick suggests as well in *The advancing guitarist* (Goodrick 1987: 100). The recording allows him to assess his playing immediately – being aware of the cognitive limitations in the moment of playing (interview with the author). »I listen,« Krantz explains,

so I can ask questions about it – whether the time is good, and the phrasing is right. If the note choices sound completely random, and I'm trying to play melodically, then I've failed. If I'm trying to play in a random way, then I've succeeded. It could be an attempt to play prettily, or an attempt to play

funkily. Whatever I try to do, I judge it by listening and then ask, »Is this as good as it can be?« (Levy 2008)

By combining the challenging exercise with recording and immediate self-assessment, he is a) cultivating his aesthetical judgement, and b) training his ears to evaluate and monitor his playing, which, in return, may help him to monitor more precisely in the moment of playing – an important skill for advanced jazz improvisation (Noorgard 2011).

Krantz prefers the term »formula« instead of scale, arpeggio, or chord structure. Without any reference to the usage of »formula« in jazz pedagogy or analysis (Finkelman 1997), he explains his understanding within his *An Improvisers OS* (2004).⁵ The improvisers operating system (OS) is all about forgetting scales and rather looking at interval structures as formulas. For example, the major scale can be viewed as the sequence of 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, whereas the dorian scale is 1-2-b3-4-5-6-b7. What's refreshing about this approach is that any interval combination from two notes up to 11 can create a formula – following the Western system of splitting up an octave into 12 equally spaced semi-tones. By doing this, one can gather up to 2,048 different formulas (what he does in the book, over 30 pages). The formulas can be applied to any root.

After a few moments of playing in that 7th zone of G melodic minor (index finger=7th fret), I acknowledge chords that are available within the framework and contain important notes such as the root, the 3rd and the 7th: C7/#11, with the characteristic #11 on my index finger on the B string, or the D7/9/b13. I »explore« them first through improvisational playing, rather surprising myself. At first, I recognize those familiar sounds that I have already played before, and then ask myself what specific chord and inversion I've formed. After years of practicing melodic minor scales, this knowledge of certain chords on certain scale degrees isn't new at all to me. Yet, the task to practice as if I would be improvising in a band context allows me to connect my theoretical knowledge in a felt, somehow holistic way that is, at the same time, fascinating and revitalizing.

For several times, that experience evokes a flow stage. Spontaneously, I start to play more »musically« or »performance-oriented«, and combine

5 Already the title reveals a certain schematic and technocratic, if not ironic, approach to guitar playing: in a sense of logical series of guitar frets.

that specific zone in G melodic minor to other chords by using a ›freeze effect‹ (by Electro Harmonics) to have a continued and sustained chord while improvising within the zone above it. Such chords would be Amin7, Emin7b5, or Bbmaj7/9/#5. The choice seems to be informed by my knowledge about the melodic minor scale itself, but appears rather spontaneous and unplanned, in the flow of improvisational experimentation, while still being in the context of an exercise. Apparently, with ongoing repetition I seem to develop a new set of muscle memory, of streams of finger movement.

During the exercise, I could ›feel‹ that something I had just played wasn't perfect, but couldn't always name it instantly. The rule to record oneself during that exercise helps me to understand the issue in detail. In fact, I could quickly find out if it was, for instance, a physical/motor issue in terms of finger movement, or a cognitive one. Based on previous experience of error correction in practicing situations, I could quickly apply those ›critical points‹ to the exercise, repeating the process again and again.

Apparently, this technical approach to the fretboard can be viewed as a widespread practice among rock and heavy metal guitarists who are often untrained in music theory: playing with ›optical scales‹ – or, moving on the guitar fretboard by memorizing it optically. However, in combination with Krantz' training in music theory and practice on the guitar, the exercise rather works as a creative, ultimately liberating tool to explore qualities of certain intervals and interval combinations of those intervals. By practicing in such zones, he seems to establish a different form of creative flow and processing, challenging, enhancing and finally changing once learned materials, pattern vocabulary, and problem solving routines, or, with Pressing, the »knowledge base« (Pressing 1998: 53f.). At the same time, by practicing and playing in this way over years, he cannot avoid that he naturally expanding his muscle memory repertoire so that it may take over during the playing situation at some points. In fact he indirectly acknowledges that, when he says, that his playing with the group feels »natural« to him, without any force (Krantz 1999, 6:30–6:40min).

At the time, I started to prepare my PhD in Musicology, I read a lot about sociological and cultural theory. Apparently, while practicing a

›Krantz-exercise‹ smoothly with a good vibe and overall feeling, all of a sudden, one certain book came to mind: French sociologist Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis. Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (1992). This book deals with the idea of space, time, and everyday live structuring patterns from a sociological point of view. I was especially occupied by Lefebvre's ideas of rhythm, his emphasis on the body as bearer of rhythm experiences, and his critique on a »mechanical« understanding of rhythm, which brushes aside the »organic aspects« (Lefebvre 2004: 15).⁶ For instance, Lefebvre points to the aspect of cyclicity of rhythms, which implies repetition and variation. That reminded me of Krantz' powerful rhythmical playing, and encouraged me to integrate more of such polyrhythms and superimposed rhythmic loops into the ›zone-exercise‹. Lefebvre says that »sound occupies a space«, and in the combination of »time-space-energy«, the latter becomes important, since it »animates, reconnects, renders time and space conflictual.« (Lefebvre 2004: 70). It is not just the actual space on the guitar fretboard, which I'm focused on so far, that counts. The musical as well as the acoustic space should also be considered. With the ›Krantz-exercise‹, this could mean, to consider the ›space‹ between single notes and chords, the breaks and stops, the rhythmical placement, the micro-timing. The acoustic space, together with the aspect of energy, draws the focus towards sound design and how sound encounters and unfolds into the room. Those performance decisions could be involve the degree of overdrive within the guitar sound, the usage of space-simulating effects such as reverb, delay, or the freeze-effect, as well as, very fundamental, the overall dynamics and loudness. When Krantz says he did his math to manage such rhythmical ideas (interview with the author), I figure I need to do this more in-depth as well, explore such rhythmical complexities in such rather playful exercises. For quite some time I did this, thinking through Krantz and Lefebvre, continuing and varying the ›zone-exercise‹, and thus creating my own individual exercises in a creative way. Krantz would approve, I guess.

6 Thinking about those rhythmical aspects reveals a still present weak spot of jazz analysis with its prominent focus on harmony and pitch content, while rhythmic aspects and sound design are still under-represented (see Pflaiderer 2018: 16).

Conclusion

Within the article I combined an exploration of Krantz' personal style with a practice-based application of Krantz' exercises from an autoethnographic perspective. Most apparent is that Krantz offers ideas that enable an accomplished player to broaden and enhance her or his playing by, e.g., expanding the muscle memory, or training the general monitoring of improvised content. His ›zone-exercise‹ appears to be an effective and refreshing alternative learning strategy for advanced players.

At the same time, the personal reflection points out that musical exercises and performances are not just limited to concrete musical ideas but incorporate further cognitive processes, as for example the reading of Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* in this case. Ultimately, the autoethnographic study – an approach, that appears to be fruitful for practice-based artistic research – reveals insights on the ongoing learning processes as well as aesthetically determined ›passages‹ or ›chapters‹ in the artistic life of a practicing jazz musician.

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