

PLAY—THE FIRST NAME
1 JULY 1997

JACQUES DERRIDA

TRANSLATED BY TIMOTHY S. MURPHY¹

Translator's Note: Derrida wrote "Play—The First Name" in response to Coleman's invitation for him to perform a "solo" onstage with Coleman and pianist Joachim Kühn during one of their La Villette concerts. On the appointed evening, Derrida took the stage with Coleman and Kühn and began to perform his composition, but press reports indicate that the audience jeered him so loudly that his words could hardly be heard. The irony of this was undoubtedly not lost on Coleman, who has himself been the object of more abuse and ridicule than perhaps any other musician in the history of jazz.

Qu'est-ce qui arrive? **What's happening? What's going to happen, Ornette, now, right now?**²

What's happening to me, here, now, with Ornette Coleman? **With you?**
Who?

¹This essay originally appeared in French in the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* no.115 (20 août-2 septembre 1997), pp.41-42. Unless otherwise attributed, all notes have been added by the translator, who would like to thank John Leavey for his advice on this translation. The original title, "Joue—Le Prénom," is difficult to translate into English. The first word, "joue," is at the same time the first-person singular, present indicative form of the verb "jouer," "to play," and the third-person singular, present indicative of that verb. In the absence of a specifying pronoun, the title is undecidable between first person ("I play," suggesting the voice of Derrida the author/speaker) and third ("he plays," suggesting Coleman, the privileged addressee).

²Derrida's text was originally written and performed in a mixture of French and English. Passages that are in English in the original are printed in boldface here, and in order to suggest something of the flavor of the original text's bilingualism, a few passages in French have been retained wherever Derrida directly juxtaposes equivalent English and French phrases.

It is indeed necessary to improvise, it is necessary to improvise *well* [*Il faut bien improviser, il faut bien improviser*]. I knew that Ornette was going to call on me to join him tonight, he told me so when we met to talk one afternoon last week. This chance frightens me, I have no idea what's going to happen. It is indeed necessary to improvise, it is necessary to improvise but *well*, this is already a *music lesson, your lesson*, Ornette, that unsettles our old idea of improvisation—what's more, I believe that you have come to judge it “racist,” this ancient and naïve idea of improvisation. **I think I understand what you meant by that.** Not the word or the thing “improvisation” but rather the concept, its metaphysical or ideological implementation [*mise en oeuvre*].

As all of you see, I have here a sort of written score, you think that I am not improvising, well, you are wrong. I am pretending not to improvise, **I just pretend**, I play at reading, but by improvising. Regarding *Prime Time*, one day Ornette said that the written parts are as improvised as the improvisations themselves. That is a great lesson, **your lesson**, on what's happening—when it's happening: to the improviser, unforeseeably, without seeing it coming, **unpredictably**.

I'm going to rephrase this lesson. I'm going to translate this lesson in my own style, in a phrase that I would like to set to music. To music but without lyricism and without making anyone sing, a phrase that is mine [*de moi*] without being mine, a phrase that I have made, if I may say so, and I will tell all of you this story, with Ornette's mother, **yes, with your own mother**.

I would like for all of you to hear Ornette's mother's voice by calling on her to speak or giving her back her voice [*lui donnant la parole ou la lui rendant*]. *Sa voix à elle*, herself, **her own voice**, that has obsessed me for eight days and eight nights, to the point of hallucination. How to improvise a phrase with Ornette's mother whose first name I don't even know, and then dedicate it to her as a declaration of love, that is the wager, the part or the piece that I am going to play for you—sometimes without an instrument and without accompaniment, sometimes, when he so decides, in the company of Ornette Coleman, superimposed . . .

I began by asking, “*What's happening? What's happening to me?*”³ The repetition of this motif is played on at least two staves [*portées*]. The phrase first asks “*what*”—or “*who*”: *what* is occurring, *who* is coming to surprise me where I had-

³Throughout the next several paragraphs Derrida is making use of the two meanings of the French verb *arriver*, which means both “to happen” and “to arrive or to come.”

n't been expecting it, where I'd been expecting it without expecting it, without seeing it coming, like Ornette and his mother and his son in my life, etc.; and then, which is not quite the same thing: "*what must be what's happening?*," or who must be coming so that it happens, and on what conditions so that someone, messiah or not, comes to us, comes to us in music, so that some *one* new musical event comes upon us?

What's happening? Who's coming? What does that mean, and what does that do, happening/coming?

So what I will reply, with my words, but inspired by what was perhaps said to me, more than a half-century ago, by Ornette's mother, which is this: "*An event—what's happening—has no price.*" "**An event has no price.**" **What does that mean?**

It has no price means: it is infinitely precious first because it is not sold, it is not bought, it is not calculated, it is foreign to the market and to marketing. **It's beyond calculation: incalculable, unpredictable.**

Now, of course, "*an event has no price,*" these are my words and my instruments, my phrase, my harmolodic variation. Ornette's mother didn't say it like that, in those words, she didn't say to her young son, one lovely morning in Fort Worth in the midst of the segregationist Deep South, "**an event is priceless,**" or "**beyond calculation,**" but she did say, in her own words, something equivalent, that I will tell all of you in a little while, after having tried to demonstrate at full speed, by accelerating the rhythm, that Ornette has had to ponder this phrase his whole life, "**in all languages,**" to cite one of his titles, as if his music of genius, the **so-called free jazz** and all of harmolodic, had become the heir [*hérité*] of this phrase, had improvised on this motif, and that everything that he is dedicating at this moment to the word "**civilization**" in this new series of concerts answered to this phrase, not as to a program but as to an order or a prayer: the order or the prayer to invent. Such as they had perhaps been given to him one day by his mother, **with her own voice.** The order to invent a priceless event is the order to make happen in music, to salute what at the same time escapes calculation and the market of music, the **music business.** In the long conversation I had with him the other day, he never stopped repeating to me, as he always does, that he didn't want to have anything to do with the institutions and powers of the **music business**, and that even when he deals with the commodity, he never gives in to it; and when that power of marketing or the media is too strong, he doesn't wage war against it, for Ornette is a free man, a sort of non-violent revolutionary,

innocent and wounded, so he does not respond to violence, he leaves. “*Do you leave, then?—Yes I leave,*” you told me, he goes and plays elsewhere and creates his music elsewhere, which he has done all his life: going elsewhere and arriving elsewhere, and always here, like tonight.

I am surprised tonight by what is without price, **surprised by the priceless**, incalculable, unforeseeable, coming to defy the market, improvising in the bargain over and above the market [*par-dessus le marché*], and over and above the mercenaries, and even over and above the thanks; it’s that music, that which happens where it wasn’t expected, well, it must create, well, it must create, it must create, it must be created where it is expected without expecting. There it is, Coleman is someone who would like to give the word “creation” back its—non-theological—youthfulness. Like his mother, whom I’m going to make speak a little later by calling her here, *bien que je ne connaisse pas encore son prénom*, **although I don’t know her first name yet**, as if his mother also wanted to give a non-psychological and non-spiritualist youthfulness back to the word “soul”—thanks to music and the priceless event. In this he is his mother’s son, the mother who one day told him what I wanted to tell all of you while protesting against what he himself had said. If you reread the short text that he has written to announce *Civilization*, you will see that the word “create” is its leitmotif, it recurs several times. And always in order to oppose itself to calculation and to a program, whether of telecommunications or, what comes down to the same thing, of the biological or genetic, of the programming of genetic knowledge and of cloning, which can be translated into music wherever there are also considerable stakes tied to teletechnology, to codification (and Ornette tries to use it without being used by it [*s’en servir sans s’y asservir*]), and to a certain **cloning, clonage**.

It is necessary to recognize that Coleman signs his name to some question that is kept to himself on this protest, that dictates a politics and more than a politics of music, when he writes the word “create,” when he stamps his intonation on it, when he gives it a tone that signifies, in my opinion, to produce some event in music, according to the sounds, dance and song, some event that is without price and in the bargain over and above the market. In the phrase that I am going to cite, Ornette speaks much of birth, of genetics and thus of genealogy, which would also bring back onto the stage his mother’s spectral voice. By opposing creation or creativity on the one hand to genetics on the other, to the informational codification of genetics, and finally to biology and to what you call

the système des castes (**caste system**), you write this, therefore, which is not such a bad definition of the priceless event and of harmolodic:

1) A notice of dedication to civilization. 2) With the birth of telecommunication and genetic cloning in the scientific and medical fields, civilization has brought to the surface the difference between creativity and biology. The world no longer needs to search for itself, but to create that civilization as it should be known; as "Heaven on Earth." 3) Civilization began with the discovery of science, agriculture, religion and medicine. With art representing a non-caste system. We are utilizing all of those subjects (in Civilization). By them being represented in a collective form of expression in sound, dance and words.

I will be asking myself for a long time why Ornette, one afternoon last week, spoke so quickly and compulsively, like a child, about his mother, whose first name I don't even know but whose silhouette and voice from the time of Fort Worth he conjured up. He didn't merely speak of her, he cited her, by imitating her in her own words. As if she was speaking to us on the telephone right then. With her own tone, a certain tone: to hear it, it is enough to pick up the telephone receiver after having **dialed a number**. You know what Coleman makes of *le ton*, of "**tone**," apropos precisely of that collection of songs that he called *Tone Dialing*. He says that tone sends us information that we cannot decipher, therefore decode, therefore calculate and put back on the market, because the feeling is too strong (**the feeling is so strong, you say**). The priceless event is that, something like tone, then, when the feeling is too strong: this is neither the words of a song, nor pure sound, but rather tonal and telephonic difference. He writes this:

"I've always thought that tone is the information, regardless of what tone it is—a true tone, an untrue tone or a tone that is sending out information that you can't decipher because the feeling is so strong. Whatever it is, the tone is the result of what you are experiencing."

It is undoubtedly here, over this story of tone and this taste for tonal difference, that I cross paths with Ornette, all my life and from very, very far away, even before we—he and I—knew it, and even before we were searching, ever since both our mothers, in the South, in the same year, in 1930, several months apart, brought us into the world. That is indeed what is going on here, where it's happening to me and supposing it to be priceless. I will be asking myself for a long time why Ornette confided in me these words from his mother whose first name I don't even know, and above all why this is what I have held onto and what I had wanted to speak to all of you about in my turn tonight, as if I wanted to learn along with you his mother's first name, that I still don't know—and to prepare myself for this priceless event.

Why have I preferred this? Why does this unknown name make me speak and this unknown woman move in with me, to the point of hallucinated obsession? Because Ornette knew me, this unknown woman who has moved in with me to the point of hallucinated obsession? Because Ornette also told me many other things, he spoke and spoke, during those hours he only interrupted himself to tell me at some point that I was “**amazing**” for seeming to know how to pose questions to him so as to make him speak or to allow him to speak so well. Like tonight, so as to make him or allow him to play all alone. He told me, what didn’t he tell me, priceless things about sound, and about **sound and democracy**, about **castes** (he always calls them castes, rather than races or classes). And we spoke of music and words, titles and politics, improvisation and money, New York and LA. He told me things, what didn’t he tell me, about love which, like music, at bottom, bursts sexual difference and is finally carried beyond sex, beyond a certain market of sex in any case (in which it has no price), and here we’re getting close to his mother’s word that I am not further going to delay relating to you. **We’re getting close to your mother’s reply**. Or again, as he said one day, what didn’t he say, one grows weary of sex, even when it is **safe**. But one does not grow weary of the love that does nothing but play harmolodically with the difference of the sexes, with gender.

He also told me, what didn’t he tell me, that one day, when very young in LA, when he didn’t understand that they wanted to kick him out, even though he understood nothing of a certain situation, a certain segregationist and police violence, he ended up in the care of a psychiatrist who, to make him understand racism, in short, and to get caste into his head, found nothing better to do than to give him valium, and Ornette threw it away, he spit out the valium. He called me to witness by erupting in laughter: *j’ai jeté le valium!* (**I threw out the valium, you told me**).

I will be asking myself for a long time why I preferred tonight to recall his mother’s word, and translate it by “the priceless event,” beyond any **marketprice** (beyond the *Marktpreis*, as a certain slightly mad philosopher, but one who had problems with music, Kant, also says in German in order to speak of civilization and human dignity as well).

One day, therefore, I am coming to it, here is his mother, she whom I am calling by surnaming [*surnommer*]⁴ her his mother since she is still for me with-

⁴The verb *surnommer* means “to nickname” but it also implies “over-naming.”

out a first name, **nameless, firstnameless**. His mother sees coming toward her her young son, who tells her, *“I’ve had enough of commercial music, of mercenary music for sex-shops, I want to break with the music that is put on sale in this city and that gives the key by setting prices in this trade in bodies and sexes. I want to have done with this commodity, with this becoming-commodity of music, I want to make a totally other music, far from all this business.”*

Now, what did his mother answer, in protest? *“Qu’est-ce que tu veux? Tu veux être payé pour ton âme?”* **“Do you want to be paid for your soul?”** (Or something like that.) **“Do you want to be paid for your soul? That’s what you want?”**

That’s what his mother said to him: one is not paid, one must not be paid for his soul, and the soul, that’s it, that’s what’s happening, that’s the music that must be heard and must be made—and must be written: this is why one is not to be paid, because it is incalculable and priceless. The event. The insinuated protest, if I have heard his mother’s tone right, was not that she was for the market of bodies and sex and for the music of that market, but that there is no dealing in what she called the *âme* (**soul**), and the music that harmonizes with it, and that happens with it. It is not sold, it is not calculated, the soul. Even if one wanted to, one could not calculate the selling of it.

That soul, that which deserves the name of soul, is what is not programmed, it’s not cloned. Commerce is good for bodies and for that which, happening only to the body, does not happen to the body because it is far too calculable. The soul and the soul’s music, what are they? What does that mean? How is the soul recognized, outside of all psycho-theologico-spiritualist discourse? By that which cannot be sold or capitalized in advance; it is the defeat of capitalism, it is the revolutionary limit, it is unsaleable at birth, when it happens, when it’s created, and when it is not calculated, when it is taken elsewhere by a saxotelephone call that none will have seen or heard coming, even though one will nevertheless have worked so much, like Coleman, to write; for he is a man of writing, he works so much, he has often said so, and a man of this writing that comes to us from the other, an incalculable writing like the best calculated music:

“One day, I finally realized that all the music I had heard, some one had made it possible for me to learn or hear it by simply writing down or repeating it. So since I became aware that it had something to do with writing, I decided that was what I wanted to be. I started writing before I started playing.”

His mother is everywhere, she is listening to me. Are you listening to her listening to me? Ornette listened to his mother, he didn't sell his music to the devil and yet he has had to calculate well a stroke of genius à la Faust not only in order to remain so young and so seductive for my age, but also in order to remain a musician of knowledge [*savoir*], invention and civilization, in order to renew his music *in all languages*, by crossbreeding [*croisant*] the musical cultures of all countries, all the instrumental idioms and all the civilizations, by means of all the techniques, artisanal or high-tech, every day as on the day of Creation.

I don't know how to speak of Coleman, **I'm not a Coleman scholar**, I can't speak of him, I can only try to speak to him, only hear him play or speak, just as I have long listened to certain expert friends speak so well to me of him, experts on Coleman and *free jazz*, those who are thus not my friends by mere chance, Jean-Pierre Moussaron⁵ or Rodolphe Burger.⁶

So, **since I can't talk about you but only to you**, in order to finish, *Eventually* (another of Ornette's titles), before asking Ornette something in order to finish, I'm going to do something that he asked me to do, and that I would not have dared to impose upon all of you, namely to read some phrases that I wrote before. Ornette would like, he informed me, to give a new impetus to them in music. Three phrases or brief fragments (*Three Ways to One*, yet another title from *Colors* with Joachim Kühn, present here, along with other chromatico-teletechnological titles, *Faxing* and *Cyber Cyber*). These three phrases dealt with music and rhythm, with the event and the proper name, with what links music to birth, to the birth, if you like, of **civilization** in the sense that Coleman sees and unforesees [*visé et improvisé*].

The first fragment is for Denardo. I am fascinated by the musical complicity between father and son: Denardo, who introduces his father to the teletechnology of music, oversees his relations to institutions and everything of that sort, in short to the **music business**, as his lawyer, but a lawyer who is a musician in his soul and who filmed us the other day, the whole time we were talking. I love the story of Denardo. I have the impression that Denardo is a bit of a father-in-law to his father (**his father's father-in-law**) and thus the most beautiful father-in-

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law [*le plus beau-père*] that Denardo's grandmother, Ornette's mother, who was thus also his wife, both of their wife, a curious piece of bio-engineering, could have dreamed of. This first fragment speaks of music and sons; it is extracted from one of the fifty-nine endless periods, sequences or phrases of "Circumfession," a sort of composition that I had composed in concert [*concertée*] all the while my own mother was dying:

...only an immortal can die, beyond or short of a being-toward-death, the time of the orchestra, for I admit, Geoff, that when I am not dreaming of making love, of being a resistance fighter in the last war blowing up bridges or trains, I want one thing only, and that is to lose myself in the orchestra I would form with my sons, heal, bless and seduce the whole world by playing divinely with my sons, produce with them the world's musical ecstasy, their creation, I will accept dying if dying is to sink slowly, yes, to the bottom of this beloved music.⁷

The second fragment would seal together the event, rhythm and music. In a text entitled "What Remains by Dint of Music,"⁸ dedicated to Roger Laporte:

what relation does this signature without a proper name, for it bears no proper name, maintain with that which is affected and affects us here by music? One can't even say that music has happened, nor that music has happened to someone (...) and yet the strange and disquieting past of "there was writing" passes here (...) by way of the musical and the rhythmic, and constrains us to rethink, to re-invent what we set out [disposons] under these words: music-rhythm.

Finally, in a text entitled "Tympan," a voice winds into the labyrinth of the ear and surrounds a phrase from Antonin Artaud on the tympanon (**drum**) of the Tarahumaras. This is what reaches the ear when I listen, for example, to Ornette, and the ear no longer closes:

The canal of the ear, what is called the auditory meatus, no longer closes after being struck by a simulated succession, a secondary phrase, the echo and logical articulation of a sound that has not yet been received, already an effect of that which does not take place. "Hollow time, / a kind of exhausting void between the blades of cutting / wood, / nothingness calling man's trunk / the body taken as man's trunk." Such is the "tympanon" of the Tarahumaras. This already enervated repercussion, of a kind that has not yet sounded, this timbred time between writing and speech, call for/themselves a coup de donc. As soon as it perforates, one is dying to [meurt d'envie] replace it by some glorious cadaver. It suffices, in sum, barely, to wait.⁹

⁷Derrida, "Circumfession" in Geoff Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.208-209. Translation by Geoff Bennington slightly revised.

⁸Derrida, "Ce qui reste à force de musique" in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

⁹Derrida, "Tympan" in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.xxviii-xxix. Translation by Alan Bass slightly modified.

Dying to [*Mourir d'envie*]. There it is, now I too am dying to ask Ornette something. He promised me to improvise, like I did, so I have not warned him what I was going to ask him. He doesn't expect it. So there it is, now I am asking him to make me a gift, **an unpredictable gift**, of his mother's first name (**could you tell me, as a gift, your mother's first name?**) so that I can call her on all my lines (internal telephone, *Tone Dialing, Faxing, Cyber Cyber*) and make a declaration of love to her. Even if you don't pronounce it, that first name, play it, send it to me in music, in saxotelephony, in saxotelephonepiphany.

J'appellerais ça, comme ta mere, un événement sans prix, **a priceless event. I would call this, as your mother would have done, a priceless event. "You won't be paid for your soul, would you?"** Thanks.