

## [Arranger braves the challenge that is Ornette Coleman](#)

- Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Gil Goldstein was bobbing slowly on the piano bench, a slightly pained expression on his face as he listened to the SFJazz Collective play Ornette Coleman's mournfully singing "Lonely Woman."

"That felt good," said Goldstein, the gifted arranger who orchestrated the classic Coleman tunes and some of the original numbers the octet will perform at its debut concerts in San Francisco this week.

Goldstein sought the essential feeling and flavor of each piece, framing the material with a knowing simplicity that lets the music speak for itself. It was particularly challenging to orchestrate Coleman's radically unconventional and intuitive music, with its freedom from predetermined harmonic and metric structures and its focus on group improvisation.

"You can't write what Ornette played, you have to feel it," said Goldstein, 53, a calm, slyly amusing man with thick white hair, green eyes and rosy skin. He was lunching on shrimp and egg rolls the other day at Eliza's on California Street, down the block from the new Jewish Community Center, where the SFJazz Collective has been rehearsing intensely.

"And there are not many people alive who can play his music the way he played it, with such rhythmic abandon. These musicians can do it. What I tried to do is make the arrangements flexible enough to fit into those floating time zones. Ornette's music is also very speech-like, and, like speech, doesn't have a strict time flow. It's a whole other language."

An excellent pianist who's worked with everyone from Billy Cobham and Jim Hall to Pat Metheny, Wayne Shorter, Stan Getz and Michael Brecker, Goldstein came into his own as an arranger in the 1980s, working with the late, great Gil Evans. He played in Evans' big band Monday nights at New York's Sweet Basil and got a rich education watching the laid-back master in action.

One of the crucial lessons he learned from Evans was to arrange a tune using the musical material of the song itself, rather than inventing stuff that can gum up the music or turn it into something else.

"A lot of times all you have to do is slightly reinvent the material," Goldstein said. "You don't have to invent a lot -- you just have to know the material you're dealing with and make it sound. I tried not to change the actual music, because that's what makes it what it is." The arranger presents the music through his prism, "but you have to avoid egotistically saying, 'I'm going to add this and make it bigger and better.' You can't do anything that adds or takes away from the composition."

Evans told him that when he arranged Miles Davis' classic "Sketches of Spain," he took almost everything he did right from Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez," on which it's based.

"He lifted from that, but when he needed to, he added a little bass line or changed the key," said Goldstein, who hewed closely to Coleman's recordings, sometimes adding a snippet from one Coleman tune to another tune where he heard a felicitous connection. He borrowed a phrase from Coleman's 1959 recorded solo on "Congeniality" for a harmonized horn passage in his new arrangement of Coleman's "Peace."

"Arranging is just that," Goldstein said. "It's like you have a room with furniture in it, and you arrange it differently. You don't have to invent all the chairs."

Goldstein spent a lot of time mulling over this music before writing a note. He was familiar with Coleman's work, and knows the man -- he loved Coleman's recent SFJazz performance -- but he wasn't an expert. The tunes for these performances were chosen by saxophonist Joshua Redman, the band's nominal leader, and SFJazz director Randall Kline. Goldstein listened to the records and played the music on the piano. It took several weeks before a fruitful idea presented itself.

"Arranging to me is like rubbing two sticks together. You wait for the spark that gets it started," says Goldstein, who laughs about the slow-sparking process of this particular job. He describes it like this: "I don't have an idea. I get tired and take a nap. Sometimes I take a nap listening to the music. Sometimes I listen to the music at half-speed to get another sound of it. You can perceive many more things that way."

The first spark came when Goldstein was walking down the street in Brooklyn, where he lives with his Swiss-born wife, Ellen, a graphic artist who does 3-D animation, and their Pomeranian, Lupa. He began hearing "Lonely Woman" in his head. At one point, two notes resolve to the interval of a perfect fourth. Goldstein thought, "Boy, if there was ever a lonely interval, that's it. It's hollow and lonely. That got me started."

He was initially stumped because he was writing for four horns (which Coleman rarely does), piano and vibes. Most of Coleman's bands haven't used piano.

"You always think of arranging in terms of harmony and chords, and Ornette's music has very few chords per se. I didn't write one chord's symbol for this whole project. People invent harmonies as they go along. They're playing single notes, and the more single notes people play eventually create chords."

He strived for arrangements that allowed "everybody to know where they were in the thing, and could contribute. That's a hard thing to do. That's what Gil (Evans) was after in his modern bands. He wanted to give the musicians a very simple format, a sketch, and hope that people used their better judgment and fill it in nicely, because when you play, you can come up with things that no composer or arranger could ever come up with."

But you need great players to make it work. "If you don't have great people and you give them freedom, you get a lot of crap sometimes," Goldstein said. "You have to be careful who you give freedom to. But if you give it to somebody like Bobby (Hutcherson, the band's vibraphonist) or Joshua or Brian (Blade, the drummer), you can almost guarantee it's going to be a good payback. They know what to do with freedom, and they should have freedom. Most musicians shouldn't."

Goldstein began taking liberties with standards as a boy accordionist in Baltimore. He was born in Washington, D.C., where his mother -- in a previous life her children only learned about as adults -- ran a jazz club, and where his father owned a liquor store after the family moved back from Baltimore.

He was 5 when his father gave him an accordion. He was concerned about making mistakes on it. "Just keep playing," advised his father, who knew nothing about music. "Nobody will ever know the difference."

Goldstein took that to heart and began playing by ear. It came to him naturally, and he began connecting the dots, realizing, for example, that "I Could've Danced All Night" was structurally similar to "Fascination." He understood the language of jazz intuitively, even if he didn't formally understand the building blocks of music until he got to college. He was playing gigs at 15, working with older musicians at joints like the Tick-Tock Lounge in Lanham, Md.

Goldstein took private jazz piano lessons in high school and studied music at American University, Boston's Berklee College of Music and the University of Maryland, where he got his bachelor's degree. He went to graduate school at the University of Miami, still associated, guitarist Metheny, bassist Mark Egan and drummer Danny Gottlieb among them (he also played with the late, storied bassist Jaco Pastorius).

Goldstein joined guitarist Pat Martino's quartet after leaving school and went on to play with many top artists. He recently toured Japan with Brecker, whose Grammy-winning 2003 album, "Wide Angles," Goldstein orchestrated, winning a Grammy himself for his "Timbuktu" arrangement. He wrote most of the Coleman arrangements in Japan on his laptop computer, sometimes playing the music on the accordion.

He compares arranging to "making a documentary, as opposed to writing a fictional film," which is more akin to composition. "I tend to prefer documentaries. I try to bring out the best of the music as I see it, but I don't want to make it up."

Goldstein composes occasionally, but he's hypercritical and doesn't think one should write a piece of music unless it's essential. "Either it totally occurred to you and hit you like a brick off the Empire State Building or don't bother," he said.

He didn't want to throw a lot of notes at these musicians because they had so much new music to learn. After playing through Coleman's tunes at the first rehearsal, Hutcherson gave Goldstein a high compliment: He liked the arrangements, he said, because they were open and gave him the freedom to find his place in the music.

Goldstein attributes everything he knows about arranging to Evans. Orchestrating the intro to pianist Renee Rosnes' piece for this octet, he wrote a passage for flute, trumpet and soprano saxophone, a sonic blend Evans found particularly beautiful. But he couldn't remember how Evans voiced the horns, so he did it several different ways.

"The one that sounds the best will be the Gil Evans chord," he told the musicians.

It's rare that a performance achieves the kind of perfection the arranger imagines in his head, but Goldstein is pleased with what he's hearing. And he's been thoroughly enjoying his Northern California sojourn.

"We're digging the mud and the wine," he said the other day with a laugh, on the phone from Calistoga after climbing out of a mud bath. "I like that primordial feeling, baby. I love California. When I grow up, I'm moving out here."

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The SFJAZZ Collective will play the music of Ornette Coleman and original compositions at 7:30 p.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday at the Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, 3301 Lyon St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$18-\$44. (415) 776-1999, [www.sfjazz.org](http://www.sfjazz.org).

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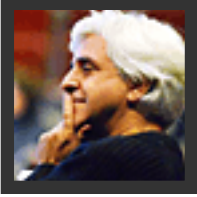
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Gil Goldstein honed his chops with Gil Evans. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



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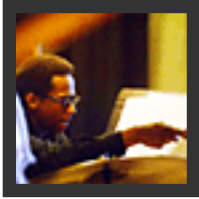


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Brian Blade's lighter-than-air, tap-dancing drumming propels the SFJazz Collective's sound. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



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