

# **Interview**

for two performers

Stephen F. Lilly  
(2021)

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*Written for SANS; duo (Jonathan Hostottle and Brian Ellis)*

## Program Notes:

Some people will never be called upon as experts. So, what would an interview with someone lacking any obvious expertise be like? Or, what if a person's expertise was completely mundane? *Interview* contemplates these questions, being equal part game and performance. As a game, the host and expert spar, seeking to unmask one another (whether or not any expertise exists, the nature of that expertise, and then the depth of knowledge supporting it) through natural-sounding banter. As a performance, both the host and the expert are painting portraits (even if only an exaggeration of self) communicated via physical gesture, word choice, and emotional state. *Interview* is not seeking to lampoon celebrity interviews; it draws more from *Fresh Air* than it does from *The Tonight Show*. While it does welcome (and even invites) the occasional tension between host and expert, *Interview* is not antagonistic. Similarly, the piece is not just a work of absurdity or an excuse for the performers to be "weird." *Interview* is rooted in reality while simultaneously inviting in surreal and absurd elements to heighten the clichés and artificiality native to all interviews.

## Overview:

For most of the work, the performers play two main roles, that of host ♯ (i.e., the interviewer) and that of expert ♠ (i.e., the interviewee). Both performers should be musicians, who have ready access to their main instruments (or singing voice).

The performers interact in one of four ways:

- The interview itself, where the host chooses and reads specific cues, provided by the composer, and the expert responds using more broadly defined response types ♣ (the cues ♯ and response types ♢ are given in the score pages that follow).
- The expert, either in response to a prompt in a cue or through a decision made on their own, can disrupt the interview with nonverbal responses (e.g., movement, gesture, or artistic expression).

- Should the expert choose a nonverbal response (either a single response or a series of them) and the host responds in kind, this constitutes an interlude. It can be of any length—even one nonverbal exchange is enough.
- Following only the musical interludes, there are post-musical interlude discussions \*\*, which, excepting their subject matter, are very much like any other interview in the work.

The work opens ■ with the host seeking to define and explore ♥ one of the subject matters the expert has staked a claim to using cues provided by the composer. Once the host has a solid grasp on the expert's subject, they move on to more challenging questions ✕ and begin introducing absurdity through the employment of non sequiturs ☉. It is at this point that the expert can begin responding nonverbally, possibly giving rise to a musical interlude depending on the how the host responds. However, the expert can also choose (at this point or later, e.g., following any number of nonverbal responses or even any number of musical interludes) to abandon their current subject and turn the tables, becoming the host and forcing the other performer to become the expert. Once this happens, the piece restarts. The piece can only begin four times. After the fourth time, the piece must run to one of the possible conclusions (more on this later). The piece does not have to begin four times, and, if desired, can end at any point after the first role reversal (i.e., the second beginning).

### Host:

For the most part, the host sequences, chooses, and reads the cues given in the score †. The cues are divided into five categories:

- Opening Cues ■. These only initiate the host's questioning. They are the only cues that cannot be repeated.
- Early Follow-ups ♥. These are used to uncover the expert's subject and the depth of their expertise—glorified ice breakers.
- Later Follow-ups ✕. These are used once the subject matter has been determined. They tend to challenge the expert more.
- Non Sequiturs ☉. These can be used once the host transitions to the later follow-ups. Some add a touch of absurdity into the proceeding, while others allow the host to passive-aggressively hint at the desire for a musical interlude or role reversal.
- Post-Musical Interlude Cues \*\*. These follow any musical interlude. While engaging in a musical discussion, the host may draw from these cues as well as the later follow-ups and non sequiturs as desired or needed.

Other than the opening cues, any cue can be repeated. This can even be done immediately, without any other intervening cue, which can be useful if the expert is avoiding the question. The host should not rewrite the cues, but they can change the wording here and there, especially upon repeating a cue.

Compound cues—cues containing rhetorical questions in addition to genuine ones or cues containing multi-part questions—can be delivered with pauses, allowing the expert to interject, or without pauses—even to the extent that the host talks over the top of the expert’s attempts to answer prematurely. If during the former, the expert’s answer veers the conversation away from the remainder of the cue, it is perfectly fine to abandon the cue for another cue that is more germane.

If the expert responds to a cue nonverbally, the host has two options: join the expert in whatever they are doing or continue asking questions, interpreting the nonverbal responses as best they can.

While in the role of host, the performer should take notes, longhand—using a legal pad, spiral notebook, or, ideally, notecards. These notes should, at the very least, contain phrases to reference in the early or later follow-ups. The host should also have an internet-connected device with which they can factcheck the expert and take questions from the audience (via text, DM, or chat). It is perfectly permissible to make the expert wait while making notes or looking something up. It is also acceptable at any point to ask the expert to repeat themselves.

If the expert asks a question without formally triggering a role reversal (the formal trigger is the statement: “No. Now, it’s my turn”), the host may answer by responding earnestly, by silently researching and then giving an informed response, by resorting to a different cue, by rewording the last cue, or by repeating the last cue verbatim.

### Expert:

Rather than reading cues, the expert is the improviser. Using the response types given in the score, the expert slowly reveals all they know about their chosen expertise. As the expert can turn the tables once their subject matter has been revealed (and this can happen more than once), both performers should prepare two non-musical areas of expertise.

To assist in this, I have provided knowledge bases below. Select two and decide on specific subjects (no more than one per knowledge base). When in the role of expert, a performer should not consult written notes with the exception of one prepared statement per subject. Do not share any of this with the other performer.

- Esoteric knowledge: Non-practical knowledge, e.g., string theory or wild fermentation. The expert should have read some on the subject and possess an interest in it.

- DIY knowledge: Useful skills, e.g., house-painting, home-repair, or gardening. The expert should perform these tasks regularly or, at very least, have done them recently.
- Professional knowledge: Expertise gained from a job outside of one's career, e.g., retail work or rideshare driving.
- Aspirational knowledge: Knowledge the expert yearns to have for a career they would've like to have followed.
- Pastime knowledge: Non-professional hobbies, e.g., solving jigsaw puzzles, following sports, or reading books.
- Self-knowledge: e.g., aches and pains, eating preferences, exercise routines, daily routines, or weekend preferences.

In answering questions, the expert can choose to be themselves or a fictional character. If creating a new persona, stereotypes are to be avoided; the invented character should have as much depth as a real person. Thus, the expert should create a character in line with or complementary to themselves rather than someone with opposing or unfamiliar viewpoints. The character should exaggerate or subdue traits the expert, themselves, possess or desire.

For every turn a performer has as expert, they should focus on only one of their subjects. If, after the subject has been revealed, the expert tires of it or the host's line of questioning, they can do one of two things: answer nonverbally or turn the tables by saying "No. Now, it's my turn" and proceeding to an available opening cue. The former can only be done if the line of questioning slumps—if the piece "just isn't working." It should not be employed to avoid an uncomfortable exchange. Nonverbal responses can be movement (e.g., dance or exercise), gestures (e.g., miming or exaggerated gesticulations), or artistic expression. If one decides to use their musical instrument as part of their artistic expression, the expert should either use unpitched sounds (e.g., key clicks, breath noise, muted plucking, string scraping or rubbing, etc.) to rhythmically approximate human speech or, alternatively, just play long tones. Unless the host joins the expert with their own instrument, the expert may return to verbal responses at any point.

Prepared statements can be read by the expert in response to any cue.

### Interludes and Conclusion:

Several of the host's cues, including two of the opening cues ■, offer opportunities for nonverbal interludes—musical or otherwise. The expert also has the option, after their subject has been revealed, of responding to any cue nonverbally. These nonverbal responses can become an interlude if the host abandons their cues and joins the expert. Just because the expert resorts to nonverbal responses, the host does not have to follow and create an interlude. Instead, they can continue asking questions, interpreting the nonverbal responses as best they can. The expert can then stubbornly soldier on, return to giving verbal responses, or turn the tables. There are cues that

help guide the host in responding nonverbally to the expert. If, however, the host should find themselves in a situation beyond the help of any cue, they should respond naturally to the expert, avoiding direct imitation.

Upon the conclusion of a musical interlude (defined as an interlude where both the host and expert use either their instruments in any way or their voice in a nonverbal manner), the host should proceed to the post-musical interlude cues \* and proceed from there. For any other interlude, the questions should either pick up where they left off (the post-interlude cue, which is the last of the non sequitur cues ♣ is a good choice for this) or the expert can immediately reverse roles by jumping right into an available opening cue ♠.

By the way, post-musical interlude discussions never revert back to the original subject. The only way out of a post-musical interlude discussion is to enter into another musical interlude or if the expert turns the tables.

The last cue in the later follow-ups × was intended to be a final cue, signaling the end of the piece, but it could also be used by a host to signal passive-aggressively that they have tired of their questioning and would like to either reverse roles or move into a musical interlude. Nevertheless, it can be used to bring about the end of the piece. Other ways to end the piece include:

- A musical interlude that fades into silence.
- A long, awkward silence.
- The expert reads one of their prepared statements, and rather than following up, the host then reads one of theirs.



## Host: Opening Cues



*These cues can be used only once per performance—either at the beginning of the piece or after a role reversal*

- *(addressing audience)* Hello, I'm *(host's name)* and this is *(show title: adjective + noun)*. As always, if any of you out there would like to chime in, please send us a question *(give text, DM, or chat details)*. Today, we have a very special guest that I'm excited to share with all of you. So, let's get right to it. *(addressing expert)* How do you like to be introduced?
- We're both musicians, but before we get to that, let's talk with conviction about something else. Perhaps there's a hobby about which you have strong opinions?
- Where to begin...
  - a long, loud sound we could crawl inside,
  - or a fleeting, soft and fragile sound—something that demands our focus,
  - or just silence, ushering in our surroundings?
- I suggest we start with an exercise or meditation—do you have something in mind?



## Host: Early Follow-ups



- The story of how you got here is fascinating; would you share that?
- During the pandemic, we turned toward epidemiologists, and whenever Brood X emerges we look to entomologists. When should we turn toward you?
- Is this like guitar? Are there tutorials I could watch on YouTube?
- Do you see your work as laying the breadcrumbs? If so, is it to help others follow you or to help you find your way back?
- That's so inspiring—you're making me rethink all my life's choices! What are the implications of what you do for your everyday Joe or Jane?
- Sell it to me.
- But can this be monetized?
- What's your five-year plan?
- Have you ever considered finding an agent?
- How has whiteness influenced your pursuit?
- How much has diversity been a consideration?
- I've had the same reaction! *(describe a reaction that may or may not be the same and then wait for a reaction or response)*
- I had no idea! *(consulting notes, ask for clarification on a small, insignificant detail from the expert's response)*
- That's crazy! I have a *(noun or object from expert's response)*, too, but mine *(describe the opposite of how the object functioned for the expert)*. Has yours ever done that?



## Host: Later Follow-ups



- *(contradict expert with information found on internet—extra points for quoting a local newspaper)* Actually according to *(source)*...
- I'd like to go back to something you said earlier: *(read quote from notes)*. Could you elaborate on that?
- Let's take a question from the audience: *(read question or comment verbatim from the chat, if there is no input from the audience, only trolling, or nothing new to read, just stare at the blank chat for a while)*.
- Won't it all just fall apart?
- If you were to take an honest look at what you've done in *(subject)*, where would you say you have fallen short? Where would you say you have excelled beyond all expectations?
- In the arts, we hear a lot about entrepreneurship because no one values it—no one values art. Is it the same situation with *(subject)*?
- Put a dollar value on it. What is *(subject)* worth to you, to me, to society?
- Does it bother you when less talented people take up *(subject)* and make more money with it?
- I've been unemployed for nearly five years now. If I were to cultivate an interest in *(subject)*, how could I turn that interest into tangible opportunities?
- Does this make you more or less angry? Because I would be furious.
- If you could, how would you restructure the institutions that support *(subject)*?
- Much has been written about the supposed merit-based hierarchies that prop-up institutions like those in professional *(subject)*. I'd love to hear your thoughts!



## Host: Later Follow-ups



- When you are publicly recognized for *(subject)*, what part of your identity do people latch onto?
- How does *(subject)* manage to keep its social relevance?
- Have recent events altered the way you approach *(subject)*?
- In light of recent events, what has changed about *(subject)*? What has changed about how you approach *(subject)*?
- Within either the theory or praxis of *(subject)*, are their approaches you find to be problematic? What makes them so?
- I'd like to quote Claudia Rankine quoting Lauren Berlant, "real thinking...interrupts the flow of consciousness with a new demand for scanning and focus." Does *(subject)* naturally provide an opportunity for this—disrupting the default interactions we have with the world and revealing something to us?
- Can we see how you would interpret that—artistically?
- I read that you play a musical instrument. Do you find *(subject)* informs your playing? Could you give us an example?
- Sadly, we're almost out of time. Is there anything you would like to leave us with?



## Host: Non Sequiturs



- When I was in high school, the local paper sent a young intern to interview me. Afterward, his editor called my mother to let her know that they were killing the story because I was too boring. Since, I've had an appearance in a documentary and two podcasts cancelled for similar reasons. What can we do to keep tonight from being cancelled?
- This is all very fascinating, but I've been having issues with my (*nonmusical technology unrelated to subject*). I can't even get it to (*action or task associated with said technology*). I'd love to get your take on this!
- Listen, I've got a mole that I think has gone asymmetrical on me. Do you mind taking a peek and weighing in?
- I have seasonal allergies—nothing too bad, really. What about you? Do you take anything for them?
- We have a screened-in porch—a real gem of a space—but those big, fuzzy bumblebees are always finding their way inside to die. What can I do; I feel just terrible?
- Where do you take your typewriter to be repaired?
- What is \$200 worth to you?
- Can we challenge without acknowledging what we challenge?
- How has the global pandemic changed your approach to risk?
- What about self-awareness? How have changes to your risk tolerance affected your sense of what motivates your decision-making? Are you more “in your head” or “in your gut”?
- John Ashbery once said that “the interview is a tragic fact of our time...In order not to deal with things, people interview them or their creator.” What do you think we are avoiding? What if the interview is the object?



## Host: Non Sequiturs



- Think of an artwork, the interpretation of which is so precarious it can be completely altered by one powerful pull from the outside. Everything in the work is suddenly colored by this new reference point—your original impressions are lost, destroyed by the gravity of this distraction. Has that ever happened to you?
- In a statistical set, “mode” refers to the value that occurs most often. If we were to seek a qualitative equivalent for the mode, wouldn’t it be mediocrity? I’m not saying mediocrity is bad or good. In fact, good and bad would, by definition, be exceptional, right? So, is “the test of time” metric selecting the most exceptional or the most mediocre?
- If you could choose what you’ll be remembered for, would you do it?
- Do you read poetry? I read poetry. I’d love to get your reaction to this Haiku by Lewis Grandison Alexander:  
Life goes by moving,  
Up and down a chain of moods  
Wanting what’s nothing.
- *(in response to a nonverbal response) Are you sure you’re doing that right? Mind if I take a swing? (depending on the expert’s response to the host’s critique, this could become an interlude)*
- Shall we take a break? Let’s do some stretching; do you know any good poses for this time of day?
- I don’t know about you, but I’m bored. We brought our instruments, so let’s duet for a bit, and then we can come back fresh. Why don’t you play something complicated while I start simply, and we can meet in the middle? *(this becomes a musical interlude, if the expert joins in)*
- *(in response to the use of instrument) That was beautiful! You know, I’m a bit of a music meddler myself. Mind if I try? (host plays a version of what the expert just played, but something changes... If, in response to the host’s offering, the expert continues to play, this becomes a musical interlude)*
- *(post-interlude cue) ...And we’re back! So, I understand you have something else you’ve been brushing up on. Give us the broad strokes.*



## Host: Post-Musical Interlude Cues



- Does an expressive work—be it visual art, music, dance, or writing—does it have to explain itself, provide its own context?
- I came across a review of poetry that labeled poems as “institutional” if they couldn’t decode themselves through explanatory notes, the simplicity of their language, or other such tools of accessibility. What do you see as your responsibility to the comfort of your audience?
- There’s a lot of talk, especially in music criticism, about emotional expressivity. Where does an engaged and fully embodied performance end and manipulative sentimentality begin?
- How much of an audience’s emotional reaction is due to familiarity and recognition rather than a response to the expressivity of the performance?
- This last musical interlude was clearly informed by our conversation. Do you think you could play something purely abstract? Do you think that’s even possible?
- What makes you uncomfortable as a performer? Is there a certain level of discomfort that you need to perform well?
- In that performance, were you drawn more to opposition or similarity? Or maybe there was something else?
- Can any performance, including this interview, exist within a vacuum or is even the attempt at disengagement a defiant (or reactionary) act?
- Is inducing a reaction tangent to the essence of a performance just a distraction? Julius Eastman’s political interpretations of John Cage come to mind. Cage himself felt the performances limited or reduced by the imposition of Eastman’s identity.
- Alice Cooper once quipped something to the effect of mixing rock and politics is stupid and essentially condescending to one’s fans, but can music even exist separate from its creator and the world in which they occupy?



## Host: Post-Musical Interlude Cues



- I once had a composer tell me “I don’t know if I believe in music anymore, but it might just be my age—the tricks are easier to spot.” For me, this composer seems to be referring both to originality—if such a thing is even possible—and authenticity—as in creating something beyond manipulative sentimentality. I think both are still possible to find but are, indeed, very rare and clouded by personal subjectivity. Can originality and authenticity even exist distinct from one’s subjectivity? Or distinct from one’s cultural identity?



## Response Types

- *Answer confidently.*
- *Answer humbly.*
- *Answer cautiously.*
- *Answer bluntly.*
- *Answer succinctly.*
- *Answer tersely.*
- *Answer vaguely.*
- *Answer with profundity.*
- *Answer with a question.*
- *Answer the question you want to be asked.*
- *Earnestly answer a rhetorical question.*
- *Ramble something approximating an answer.*
- *Ask for clarification.*
- *Politely challenge the line of questioning.*
- *Profess ignorance.*

## Cues and Nonverbal Responses

- *I'd like to read a prepared statement. (read prepared statement)*
- *(turn the tables) No. Now, it's my turn...(select available Opening Cue)*
- *Answer through instrument (unpitched sounds or long tones).*
- *Respond with art.*
- *Respond with movement.*
- *Respond with gesture.*