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Improvising Identity: Jazz, Experimental Music, and the Politics of Musical Migration

The concept of improvisation emerged in the twentieth century as a determining influence on musical culture in Europe and North America. Improvised musical forms persisted in European folk music alongside the production of notated sacred and art music compositions in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the practice of improvising entire or partial pieces, as described in contemporary accounts of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, was abandoned by subsequent generations of European musicians. As the ability to improvise cadenzas, fugues, and other forms became less important to European musicians, the aesthetic distinctions between composition and improvisation, and the related social divisions between the positions of composer and performer, became increasingly reified. Improvisation reappeared in Western musical discourse in the early twentieth century with the production of recordings of African American musics. The distribution of these and other recordings of non-European music led some musicians to an active reengagement with the concept of improvisation. This shift resulted in the emergence of a group of musicians in the 1960s who prioritised spontaneous invention over the use of predetermined musical structures, such as notated or internalized compositions, traditional song forms, harmonic schemes, scales, or rhythmic cycles. By the end of the twentieth century, we could, in improviser and scholar George Lewis's words, identify "'improviser' as a functional musical activity role in world-musical society, along with such roles as 'composer,' 'performer,' and 'interpreter'."

Today I will trace the development of the “musical activity role” of “improviser” by drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the influential improvised music scene in London, England. The musicians who participated in this scene in the 1960s based their practices on the modernist ethos and activist politics of post-bebop American jazz, pursuing a rigorous musical approach that continues to inform the discourse and practice of improvisation around the world. Of particular relevance to the conference theme is how the musicians in my study self consciously used the concept of improvisation to construct and assert new musical identities that have proven to be meaningful to subjects living outside of England.

I present this research into the practices of European improvisers as a response to George Lewis’s 2004 article “Improvised Music after 1950,” which is an important critique of how Eurocentric discourses have obscured the contribution of black – specifically African American musicians – to the experimental music of post-1950s Europe and North America. In this article Lewis explores how the language around improvisation reveal systemic racial inequalities, and interrogates the social practices that perpetually position black experimental improvisers as “jazz” musicians – a situation he wryly refers to as the “one drop rule” of jazz. In my research of a scene populated primarily by white musicians living in a relatively privileged society, it became clear that English improvisers have a complex yet productive relationship with their African American antecedents. My analysis of the words of those operating at the ground level of a politically charged musical area is intended to lend nuance and context to the issues Lewis raises around the “structural limits to aesthetic agency and practice” that inform cultural production in contemporary society.

Part I - Cultural Context

To begin my analysis, I will provide some brief historical context. The improvisation practices I research are fundamentally informed by the shift in American musical culture from jazz as music for dancing and entertainment, to jazz as art music for listening. This shift took place in the early 1940s through the work of musicians such as Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and others. These musicians, in Paul Hegarty's words, established "the *idea* of jazz as avant-garde" music. With their focus on extended improvised solos characterised by a high level of instrumental dexterity and melodic invention, Parker and his colleagues shifted the priorities of a jazz performance away from the details of the particular compositions they played to the extended, real-time melodic manipulations of the performers. Although the traditional forms of jazz that preceded bebop persist alongside it, these musicians moved jazz – and by extension, improvisation – into the discursive frame of art music.

Closely following the bebop revolution in African American music was the introduction of "indeterminacy" to Eurocentric concert music through the work of John Cage and his followers. The problematic racialised distinctions between "indeterminacy" and "improvisation" that Cage maintained throughout his long career are too complex to address here; for my analysis, it is enough to say that Cage's interventions into an art world dominated by carefully notated compositions mirrors that of Parker's break from commercially focused jazz – Cage's works generated a division between a mainstream characterised by fixed musical texts and an avant-garde

that prioritises both living composers and the real-time contributions of the players to the realisation of a work.

This brief description of the two fronts from which improvisation re-entered Western musical discourse provides the basic context for the thoughts to follow. The interpretative strategies I use for the ethnographic data I collected in the London improvised music field reflect Michel Foucault's ideas about creating a "history of the present" by uncovering the origins of the rules, practices, and institutions that regulate current social actions. By examining the words of early adopters of the identity position of improviser, I seek to better understand how this "functional musical activity role" is used by those currently working in the music field.

Part II

The development of 'improviser' as a distinct identity required contributions from musical subjects working in a variety of locales around the globe, so it is problematic to privilege one place in a historical analysis. That said, the English musicians who took up the practice of free improvisation in the early 1960s have had a significant influence on musicians in other parts of the world, primarily because they thoroughly documented their music and ideas on recordings and in writings that were distributed outside of England, and because their music was so identifiable by how it excluded predetermined compositional frameworks.

I began my research in this area with the goal of investigating how these musicians generated their improvised performances, but quickly became more interested in how they used the idea of improvisation to construct oppositional musical identities. In recounting their personal histories, my interview subjects revealed certain

ideological and behavioural dispositions that taken together contribute to our understanding of what it means to be an improviser. This introductory exploration of improvised music in late 1960s and early 1970s England will address three main points towards building a composite sketch of the role of improviser: English musicians' relationship to jazz; the discursive positioning of improvisation as an autonomous, genre-free practice; and improvisers' relationship to the composer figure. Running in the background of these themes is the overarching discourse of modernism, which continues to shape the improvised music field in meaningful ways.

To begin, almost all the first generation English improvisers I spoke with discovered – or at least put a name to – improvisation through hearing American jazz records. Many grew up playing classical music or the pop music of the day, and their early formal music education, if they had any, was based around learning the notated music of the famous European composers. After hearing jazz, these musicians set out to play it themselves. Although many English musicians worked to gain competence and establish careers playing more-or-less adventurous approximations of American-style jazz, those who went on to establish the improvised music scene asked critical questions about music and their role in the cultural field, as evidenced by pianist Howard Riley's comments about his development:

The problem for European musicians from my generation was what to do with the fact that we're not American. I realised early on that there's no use in just imitating Americans – I call that 'dialect jazz.' It was great to try of course, but after you've been playing a while you ask yourself, 'Well, is this it? Where do I come into it?' This is the tricky bit, developing your own feeling and language, yet still retaining the best aspects of the point you started off from.

Percussionist Eddie Prévoost offered a similar story that illustrates his interest in creating music that reflects his experience of growing up in post-war England:

We wanted to move away from the jazz models of improvisation, which we grew up with and liked, but at the same time didn't feel entirely comfortable with because they didn't arise out of our experience. You heard what someone had done in the 1950s in Chicago or New York, and initially you tried to come up with a version of that, which often was not very successful. I still admire and have a strong affection for jazz, but we were interested in the possibility of making our own musical world outside of that.

These two anecdotes demonstrate a shared intention to use jazz as a kind of spiritual, philosophical model for developing musical and social relationships that project a local, rather than imported, world view. Intentionally omitting the most obviously identifiable musical materials of American jazz, the improvisers from Riley and Prévost's generation took up the politics of self determination and the modernist ethos that characterised African American bebop and early free jazz and used them as a model to pursue a parallel project of identity formation and community building in England. Unlike the high art world that Lewis critiques in his analysis of John Cage and American experimental music, the white, English improvisers I spoke with never obfuscated nor denied the influence of black musicians; rather, they shared a view of their place in the music field that was best articulated by American bassist Steve Swallow:

Although we were inspired by the possibility of making a radical break with the past, I don't think that that meant that we disapproved of what Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis were doing; on the contrary, we revered that stuff. In a way that's the most sincere praise of Sonny Rollins – not to even dare to venture into what he had done so well, which meant trying to find our own way.

London improvisers' relationship with jazz as at once an ideological model and a set of imported musical conventions to avoid in the pursuit of their "own way" continues to inform the practices of improvisers in London. Globally, the discourse of improvisation is made more complex by the ongoing, systemic racial inequalities that allow white

musicians more mobile and flexible identities than their black counterparts, yet I think it meaningful that those working on the ground level of the field, such as Riley and Prévost, recognise the historical context of their improvisatory practices, rooting their desire to avoid repeating and copying the music of black musicians in a shared spirit of inquiry and self-conscious identity construction that necessarily requires different sonic materials to reflect different histories.

The second recurring theme in improvisers' discussion of their music is the notion that improvisation is an autonomous practice that exists apart from genre. An anecdote from Canadian trumpet player Kenny Wheeler, who has lived in London since the early 1950s, is illustrative of this idea:

I remember once at the Little Theatre Club John Stevens said, 'Let's play a blues.' So we played a blues, and while we were playing I was counting and thinking, 'This doesn't sound like a twelve bar blues to me.' I spoke to him about it afterwards, and he said, 'No, I meant just play the feeling of the blues'.

In this situation the members of the group were asked to play with whatever materials they imagined were left when you removed the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic framework of an idiom – the underlying assumption being that there would be *something* left to work with, and that the musicians could manipulate the remaining materials to generate a performance. The idea that improvisation can be separated from the genres in which it appears connects to the previous point, for this assumed autonomy means that improvisers themselves become free to shift between genres, and indeed are discursively positioned as inhabiting a kind of non-genre. Derek Bailey's much-debated term "non-idiomatic" improvisation is an important articulation of this ideal; I don't have time to weigh in on this debate, but the discourse around the term is illustrative of how the role of improviser has come to represent a mobile musical subject

who has the skills to deconstruct established styles and the desire to develop new musical forms. It is this point that George Lewis takes issue with, for he argues that not all musicians are allowed the mobility and agency to inhabit this kind of blank sociomusical space. Bracketing this important critique for now, the ways that the musicians I spoke with described their practices positions the improviser as a kind of trickster figure, a musical subject who sees their role as leading a process of progress, constant innovation, and change “through a radical intervention in art and culture” (Born,1995, 43).

The third point that characterises early London improvised music is an antagonistic relationship to composition. Improvisation in Western culture is discursively constructed as the binary opposite to composition, even though the majority of improvisation in global musical cultures takes place within composed frameworks. Again bracketing the material details, the first generation of London improvisers specifically defined their activities against the dominant education and cultural systems in 1960s England, favouring the fully notated works of long dead European composers in the execution of their programming. If one was interested in exploring alternatives to the then-available musical identities, improvisation represented a radical musical practice that one could take up to that end. Eddie Prévost is particularly vocal in his resistance to composition, referring to it in a description of his weekly improvisation workshop as an inherently authoritarian practice:

You can't bring in a precomposed piece to the workshop, because someone might say, 'I don't want to do that.' And they would be quite right to say that. It would be infringing on someone's freedom to introduce such regulation. You have to push other authorities aside, and make a new authority arising from the components we have in the moment of doing it.

As Prévost described it, improvisation offered a way to resist the social inequalities perpetuated by capitalism by allowing musicians to noisily state: “I am not that.” He has used improvisation to develop a more communitarian approach to collective music-making than that offered by dominant musical culture. Many of the improvisers who have followed Prévost and Derek Bailey have taken a softer line on avoiding composition—a generational shift which Prévost sees as alarming and disappointing—but the ability to improvise an entire performance without reference to a predetermined text or guidance by a composer figure remains a key component of what it means to be an improviser, as is the willingness to accept working on the economic margins of the cultural field.

Conclusion

As I alluded to earlier, the musical practices documented by the London improvisers, and by extension the related identity politics, have been taken up by musicians around the globe, including in my home field of Toronto. Toronto currently supports a lively improvised music scene, and much of the music being made owes a considerable debt to the sounds pioneered by Derek Bailey, Eddie Prévost, and other London improvisers. The “musical activity role” these English musicians developed has thus migrated back to North America, and been taken up by subjects who grew up in an entirely different musical and cultural context. Based on my own experience as a participant in this field, those who self-identify as improvisers who came of age over the last thirty years share a devotion to improvisation as a generative process, but are more likely than their English predecessors to play composed forms of music as well, either for economic reasons or simply for pleasure. According to Eddie Prévost, the political edge of improvised music

has been dulled substantially as the improvised music field has become more established, with its own venues, publications, festivals, record labels, and other structures:

We think of it as still being marginal, but it's a big margin now compared to what it was when we started playing in the 1960s. It's changed now beyond all recognition in terms of its acceptability at festivals and in the media. And people can cross over – I know young trained musicians now who do a bit of contemporary music, a bit of session work, a bit of free improvisation... Now it's become one of the strings you can add to your bow. That's not the way most of the people who began it saw it.

This situation is to be expected, as the ageing, settling, and expansion of the art form means that free improvisation is less of a radical cultural intervention than it was when it was entirely unfamiliar to the average musical subject. That said, despite the changing priorities of musicians it is still a meaningful choice to take up the activity role of improviser, for this identity contains within it the notion that one is interested in searching for new sounds and social relationships, whether one is successful in finding them or not. The commitment to function as producers, rather than consumers of culture continues to motivate contemporary improvisers as it did the first generation, and the variety of choices improvisers make to pursue this imperative demonstrates the continued importance of music for constructing a sense of self and asserting one's agency, especially within an economic system that prioritises consumption. Although the potential of improvised music to affect social change has shifted over time, given the modernist, activist history that is mobilised when one takes up the role of improviser we can learn much about how music shapes culture by looking towards the musical and social practices of those who make improvisation the "aesthetic priority of their creative lives.