The London School Of Improvised Economics - Peter Johnston 2011

This excerpt from my dissertation was included in the reader for the course MUS 211: Music Cultures of the City at Ryerson University.

Introduction

The following reading is a reduction of a chapter from my dissertation, which is titled *Fields of Production and Streams of Conscious: Negotiating the Musical and Social Practices of Improvised Music in London, England.* The object of my research for this work was a group of musicians living in London who self-identified as improvisers, and who are part of a distinct music scene that emerged in the mid-1960s based on the idea of free improvisation. Most of this research was conducted between Sept 2006 and June 2007, during which time I lived in London and conducted interviews with both older individuals who were involved in the creation of this scene, and with younger improvisers who are building on the formative work of the previous generation. This chapter addresses the practical aspects of how improvised music is produced in London, and follows a more theoretical analysis in the previous chapters of why the music sounds like it does. Before moving on to the main content, it will be helpful to give a brief explanation of two of the key terms that occur throughout this chapter: "free improvisation" and the "improvised music field."

"Free improvisation" refers to the creation of musical performances without any pre-determined materials, such as form, tonality, melody, or rhythmic feel. This practice emerged out of developments in jazz in the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly in the work of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, who began performing music without using the song-forms, harmonic progressions, and steady rhythms that characterized jazz until that time. European musicians, in an attempt to develop their own musical identities, took up these ideas in a particularly serious way, and began improvising music that purposely avoided any references to jazz and popular music. London became an important centre for this kind of music making, as a dedicated community of musicians emerged in the late 1960s who rigorously avoided pre-composed musical materials, tonal and harmonic forms, a steady rhythmic pulse, and even instrumental sounds that might be considered conventional. These improvisers generally conceptualize their music as being experimental, and consciously push against the boundaries of what most people socialized in Western culture think of as "music." I will refer to this music in the following pages as either improvised music—when speaking in a general sense about the practice of improvising entire performances—or "London improv," to reflect the very specific practices and sounds that are associated with London improvisers. Audio and video samples of the musicians I discuss are posted on the web at www.seethroughmusic.com/londonimprovsurvey.

"Improvised Music Field" refers to all the people (musicians, audience, journalists, promoters, record store operators, record label owners, venue owners, etc.) and structures (venues, media outlets such as magazines, radio, and newspapers, record stores/labels, educational institutions, government arts funding agencies, etc.) who

collectively produce and consume improvised music. This comprehensive term is meant to demonstrate how music is not an abstract creation that emerges from the imagination of an individual to be enjoyed by a receptive audience, but a cultural activity that is dependent on a complex system consisting of subjects who fill a wide variety of social roles. As an example, improvised music's existence depends on a critical mass of people who understand the music (which comes from the education system and media), spaces where the music can be performed (private venue owners, government funding for art institutions), the potential for reaching new audience members and future musicians (record stores, labels, and media coverage), and even on instrument manufacturers, as they create and maintain the tools through which the improvisers pursue their creative ideals.

Much of the following analysis of the improvised music scene in London will involve describing the specific structures and conventions that mediate the production of improvised music in that city; the much smaller improvised music scene in Toronto (where I live) functions in a similar fashion, yet there are certain differences that distinguish the two, such as the prevalence of pubs with back rooms in England, and the absence of similar venues in Toronto, for one example It is hoped that this description of a specific scene will offer general ideas for how one might use similar criteria to explore how different musical forms function in other places.

I - Situating The Sounds

My investigation of the London improvised music field owes much to the basic analytical model Howard Becker (1982) developed to investigate artistic production in his book *Art Worlds*. In this important book Becker treats "art as the work some people do," and "artists as not so very different from other kinds of workers" (Becker 1982, ix-x). *Art Worlds* is a general analysis of various art forms, but Becker's ideas are easily transferable onto the specific context of the London improvised music field. For example, American bassist Barre Phillips used similar language to Becker to describe his role in an improvising ensemble:

> The thing about improvisation is that if you're playing with two or three people, you're in a situation where you're going to hear sound. How do you hear yourself in this sound? Your job as a worker is to make what you are hearing in your ear and what is coming out of the instrument the same thing. That's quite a job, even if you're playing notated music.

In framing improvisers as workers I do not mean to devalue their artistic motivations and political intentions for their music, but to use this frame as a metaphor to interpret how the participants in my study articulate and sustain the practice of free improvisation within a generally disinterested socioeconomic system. I was drawn to Becker's ideas when I noticed the recurring theme of economics in the interviews I conducted in London; most of the improvisers I spoke with either had day jobs, a supportive spouse, or lived in a state of perpetual financial distress. The improvisers who work within the professional musician model—by which I mean they play other musical styles along with improvised music—endure the insecure financial situation of freelance cultural work for the privilege of playing music full time. In either situation, London improvisers do not count on support from the government or the state-run

cultural institutions, so their creative work is determined by the kinds of lifestyle decisions they must make to live in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The identity of "improviser" is thus not solely based on a particular creative process, but is a social position that is articulated through an engagement with the structures and systems that regulate both creative and everyday activities in the locations where improvisers choose to live. Those who claim the identity of improviser in London do a variety of work to enable the continued production of improvised music, and an analysis of these patterns of work can tell us something about how the improvised music field functions.

London shares a similar mythology in the improvised music field as New York City does in the jazz field: they both continue to attract musicians from around the world based on their association with radically innovative musical communities of the past. In speaking with veteran improvisers from both cities, the kind of musical experimentation that took place in New York and London in the 1950s and 60s was made possible by affordable living conditions; a low cost of living meant that musicians could spend a greater portion of their time focusing on their creative work. When I asked Barre Phillips about his experience living in New York in the early 1960s, he said:

> During that time in New York we were playing all the time. For example, I got together with [clarinettist] Jimmy Giuffre a few times a week for about two years, but it wasn't like were keeping the band oiled up and going or anything, because there just wasn't much work. We were playing for the sheer pleasure of playing, but life was so cheap that you didn't have to work all that much anyway. It wasn't like it is today.

English saxophonist Evan Parker's description of London during the same period reveals a similar situation for the first generation of London improvisers:

> You could live on almost nothing if you had no material ambitions. Just surviving, paying rent and eating was very easy back then. Now, it's the opposite. So we were very lucky to meet one another, get to know one another and make connections to each other back then, because now I see that it's harder for people to meet or get a chance to play.

In the intervening years these two cities have maintained their status as important creative centres, and as a result contain a large population of immigrant musicians. Yet the cost of living in both cities has risen so dramatically that the social support systems that allowed for the initial burst of creative activity are no longer available for those wishing to work as full time improvisers in the way that Parker and Phillips have been able to do.

This anecdotal analysis of life in the 1960s perhaps betrays an excessively rosy nostalgia for an era that is already excessively romanticized, but Phillips's and Parker's comments do align with the general economic trends I will describe in more detail later in this chapter. I can also relate to these anecdotes on a personal level, as my own brief experience of the cost of living in London made me long for my return to the most expensive city in Canada. However, as with New York City, the critical mass of creative practitioners and potential audience members in London means that improvisers are willing to deal with the day-to-day challenges of a high cost of living in exchange for opportunities to pursue their musical imperatives. In evoking the notion of an easier time for artists I do not intend to idealize the past, or to position improvisers as powerless victims of capitalism; rather, I wish to highlight the resilience of improvised music as a form of cultural expression through exploring how improvisers, despite economic obstacles, continue to carve out space for their creative activities.

My description of the social and economic contexts of London improv is based on the assumption that live public performance is the primary location for the practice of free improvisation. Performances function both as occasions for musical exploration and as situations where improvisers might potentially earn the economic capital required to support their continued creative work. In my observations of the London scene I noted that improvisers organized their social and creative lives around attending, pursuing, or participating in live performances, both public and private (rehearsals, casual sessions), so therefore the infrastructure that enables performances is a determining element in the way improvised music is produced and consumed in the city. Public performances are largely determined by economics, as improvisers require spaces in which to play, media in which to advertise performances, and a certain amount of financial stability to continue functioning as artists in the cultural field. These constraints affect the musical practices of improvisers, as they regulate the opportunities for public musical experimentation. In this chapter I will build my analysis around public performances as the primary location for the articulation of musical ideals, personal and collective identities, and patterns of work.

II – Structuring the Spontaneous

Veteran English percussionist Eddie Prévost has written extensively on the relationship between artistic practices and the dominant economic structures that regulate artists' actions within society, and some of his thoughts offer a productive starting point for the following description of the improvised music scene in London:

> Collective improvisation in western society runs counter to the commodity ethos, even though its most dedicated musicians, who give their lives to its creation and

> continued development, have to tread a difficult and often painfully compromising path through the market economy in order to secure a living. (1995, 89)

The musicians in my study deal with the constraints of the market economy on a daily basis, as their practice of making music that self-consciously avoids popular music conventions means that they exclude themselves—or their creative productions at least—from the dominant economic system that regulates Western culture. In London there are few major record labels with an interest in recording or distributing improvised music, and none of the music festivals I attended were sponsored by banks, tobacco, car, or alcohol companies as many of the jazz festivals in North America are. In terms of the non-market-based systems of support for the arts, the improvisers in my study claimed that there is little government support for their activities, and that free improvisation has only a marginal presence in the post-secondary education system, which plays such an important role in sustaining classical music and, increasingly, jazz. The participants in the London improvised music field thus pursue a distinct do-it-yourself approach to cultural production, an ethic that manifests structurally as musician-run record labels, self-organized performances, and grassroots organizational initiatives such as Eddie Prévost's weekly workshop and the non-profit advocacy group the London Musicians Collective.

The economic imperatives that regulate the improvised music field have resulted in a shift away from the professional musician model that characterizes the jazz field, and around which the post-secondary music education system is structured. Although it may be a romanticized fiction to think that anyone was ever able to make a living playing jazz, the position of jazz musician carries with it certain expectations around the

acquisition of musical skills that can be transferred into other, more lucrative fields (popular music, pit orchestras, commercial sessions, dance bands, etc.), and the assumption that one is entitled to payment for the use of these skills in performances. The position of improviser is more reflective, economically and socially, of the folk musician model, in which the expectation of payment for making music is significantly reduced, and the required skills are entirely specific to a particular style of music making. I will explore this dichotomy in more detail later in this chapter, but for the present context I suggest that although day-to-day public performances are the main locations for the production of improvised music in London, these occasions are not able, or expected, to generate a reliable income for improvisers.

The majority of the performances I witnessed in London offered no financial guarantee for the improvisers, which suggests that they pursue performance opportunities in response to other imperatives. Most of the performances I attended were what the improvisers I spoke with referred to as "door gigs"—in this circumstance an individual, or group of interested people, books a venue, does their own advertising, sets a price for admission (which usually was divided into regular and unwaged rates), collects the money at the door, pays for their expenses (rental, promotion, and other incidentals) out of the money taken in on the night, and divides the remainder between the musicians. To add to this challenge, most of the performances I attended took place in relatively small rooms, with little budget for promotion. As a result, audiences in London were usually small (typically between ten and forty people, depending on the venue and performers), even for internationally known local improvisers such as Evan Parker. This is not to say that musicians don't make any money from door gigs, as they

might do reasonably well depending on attendance. However, the willingness of improvisers to accept performances with no financial guarantee underscores certain fundamental differences between the position of improviser and the professional musician model I alluded to above. Specifically, there is reduced expectation around getting paid to perform, and an acceptance that the potential for payment is contingent on how many people come to hear the music. The door gig has become the dominant model for performances in London, and for my home field of Toronto.

There are rare occasions where improvisers can expect to be paid for performances, but these are usually connected to multi-artist festivals that function through government, corporate, or private sponsorship. The internationally known musicians in my study who make their living from improvised music, such as Evan Parker and Barre Phillips, rely on these festivals for the bulk of their income. Such a situation leads to competition between participants in the field for the few opportunities to be financially compensated for their efforts. Yet these opportunities are rare, and my observations in the London improvised music field correspond with Derek Bailey's assessment of the importance of day-to-day music making—versus formal festival concerts—to the continuation of free improvisation as a musical practice:

> The bulk of freely improvised music, certainly its essential part, happens in either unpublicised or, at best, under-publicised circumstances: musician-organized concerts, ad hoc meetings and private performances. In other words, simply in response to music making imperatives. And it's easy to see that the more conducive the setting is to freely improvised music, the less compatible it is likely to be with the kind of presentation typical of the music business. (1993, 141)

Based on my experience in the city, door gigs in small venues—where I could expect to pay £3-5 as a student for an evening of music—continue to be the most common situation for the public presentation of improvised music in London.

Within this basic door gig paradigm, a common model of performance organization in London involves improvisers booking individual performances for themselves and their friends, or booking an ongoing series at a particular venue. As an example, during the time I was living in London saxophonist Alan Wilkinson booked a regular series of improvised music performances he called Flim Flam, at a pub called Ryan's Bar. Wilkinson described his motivation for organizing performances:

> The money situation is so ridiculous in this country. It's very difficult to do regular gigs with decent money. So to keep themselves playing musicians traditionally organize their own gigs. That's how the scene keeps going—musician run gigs that are door money gigs. That's why I don't like to pay for the room, because all the money I get I like to divide amongst the musicians and that's it. Which kind of works, because unlike the rock scene you don't tend to have overheads like sound engineers and that sort of thing.

This account of the economic situation improvisers work with reveals the most determining element of the improv ethic: the improvisers I heard and spoke with clearly find enough value in their activities to continue searching for playing opportunities, despite the lack of economic return on their investment of time and energy. Wilkinson is just one example of many other musicians who proactively organize their own performances; Derek Bailey's Company Week—an annual performance series he convened from 1977 to 1995, in which he brought together performers from diverse musical fields to improvise together—is a well-known example of this practice, as is guitarist John Russell's Mopomoso series, which is a monthly event that features three sets of ad hoc performances, usually including a set by Russell himself. These musician-

organized performances do not exclude or replace the contributions of non-musician promoters, as I met several dedicated volunteers who organized performances in pubs and other spaces—Martin Davidson, who co-organizes the annual Freedom of the City Festival in London is one example; another is Sybil Madrigal, who organizes Boat-Ting, a bi-weekly performance series that claims to bring you "the cutting edge of experimental music and poetry" (www.boat-ting.co.uk). Most of the improvisers I spoke with who organize their own performances would rather somebody else do this work, but as Wilkinson notes, improvisers take on these jobs in response to their own music making imperatives.

While in London I spent many nights at a pub called The Red Rose Club, which was a compelling example of how the musical genre of improvised music is maintained by a network of unpaid participants, working within a bottom-up organizational system. To the best of my knowledge, The Red Rose itself operated from a relatively neutral aesthetic position—the owners rented the back room for various cultural events, and provided minimal infrastructure, such as a stage, chairs, heating, reasonably clean washrooms, and beer, which was for sale in the front room. Apart from these basic amenities, most of the labour related to hosting a performance was performed by a small community of volunteers—sometimes musicians, sometimes not—who publicised the event, set up the chairs, took money at the door, and cleaned the room afterwards. In other words, like any other artistic field in which public performance is a key component, improvised music performances depend on people to do "whatever the artist, defined as the person who performs the core activity without which the work would not be art, does not do" (Becker 1982, 24). Yet the economic situation in the

improvised music field is such that there is little motivation for professional promoters, venue owners, sound engineers, etc. to get involved in the music, so the improvisers themselves take on jobs not traditionally associated with the position of artist. The improvised music field as a social domain thus arises out of the complex relationships between the artists, the interested non-artists who attend, organize, and generally support the music, and the neutral forces that provide necessary infrastructure that the more active participants cannot—e.g., the owners of venues who provide performance spaces, and the media outlets that print free events listings.

This brief description of the ways improvised music performances are organized underscores how the field depends on the efforts of individuals and small groups for its day-to-day existence, rather than on institutions. Cellist Mark Wastell—who owns a small record shop in London along with being an active performer in the field—described the grassroots, do-it-yourself ethic that characterizes improvised music world-wide:

> In my experience, whether it be staging concerts, running retail outlets, small labels or whatever, it's down to individuals really. They're not company led, there's no board of directors. It's always down to individuals who decide to do something. So that's how this endeavour continues, right across the globe. It's no different in Tokyo, it's no different in New York, it's no different in Berlin. It's exactly the same everywhere you go—individuals who have made a mark, who have run concerts, festivals and labels to little reward outside of the immediate scene.

In this description Wastell discursively positions the improvised music field as being based on an alternative mode of organization to that of the popular music field, which

he characterizes as operating with a corporate-based, profit-centred structure.[1] The roles participants in the field fill are similar to those that other music fields require, so Wastell's description points to how the improvised field is regulated by the same economic laws and patterns of work that determine other non-commercial musics. However, as I suggested in the previous paragraph, the improvised music field is distinct from more mainstream fields in the variability of roles that artists must take up. Wastell and Wilkinson are examples of this flexibility, as they took on the jobs of shopkeeper and promoter respectively, both to finance their own creative endeavours and to contribute to the continuation of their local scene. The organizational structure of the improvised music field is thus composed of participants from a variety of positions in the field, who contribute a myriad of skills and perform labour ranging from promotion, custodial duties at the venues, managing record labels, and playing the saxophone.

My ethnographic research focused primarily on the improvisers themselves, as the people who perform the core artistic activity around which the other participants in the field co-ordinate their activities. I will not go much further into the details of the supportive roles filled by non-musicians in the field, beyond echoing Howard Becker's (1982) general argument that artistic forms, such as London improv, exist through

[1] The economics of the popular music field have changed considerably in recent years, as shifts in the ways we consume music have diminished artist revenues from album sales and performances. With the ongoing closure of record stores and shrinking amount of money available to record labels, the 'indie' side of the popular music field — which is characterized by self-financed recordings and low or no fee-performances — has grown considerably. Yet despite this continuing trend in popular music towards the kind of DIY structures that have long been the foundations of improvised music, the distinction between the two fields remains intact based on the persisting economic disparity between popular and art musics. Musicians working in the popular music field can still aspire to elevated social and economic status should they succeed in that market, while even the most established and well-known improvisers subsist on the margins.

patterns of co-operation between those who create the art and those who are part of the systems of support and distribution that allow the art form to enter the public consciousness. However, two non-musicians I met—Martin Davidson and Tim Fletcher—are worth attending to in some detail, for their contributions to the field as documentarians clearly demonstrate how the production of a particular musical form extends beyond those we most readily identify as artists. It is also worth noting that it is through Davidson and Fletcher, and others like them in different cities, that I was first introduced to London improv, so their work has had an impact beyond the geographical boundaries of London itself.

Martin Davidson's description of his motivations for running a record label specializing in improvised music reveals another aspect of the do-it-yourself approach that typifies the London improvised music field:

> There was so much incredible music being made, and none of it was being documented. I wanted to have a go at documenting and broadcasting it. Not many people knew about it—there were odd things on the radio, a few hours a year, and very few records available. I just wanted to increase that, and get people abroad to hear about it as well. Plus, being a record collector, it was a long-term ambition to have my own label. At the time when I started I didn't succeed very well, but I did do something. I was always running into financial problems, which were very restrictive on what I could put out. The process of making records I find very enjoyable, though it's a pain to try to sell the stuff.

This documentation project, under the name Emanem Records, started in 1974 and continues despite the harsh economic realities of being a small-scale record producer. To save on costs, Davidson designs all the packaging, often mixes and masters the recordings himself (particularly the archival amateur recordings from the formative years of the scene), stores the stock in his house, and ships the discs himself to distributors, stores, and individual customers. Emanem is a very small operation, and

depends solely on Davidson's efforts for its existence, but his dedication to improvised music has made the label's extensive catalogue an invaluable aural history of London improv. Emanem has also allowed the sounds developed by musicians such as Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Barry Guy, Paul Rutherford, and Kenny Wheeler, among others, to travel the world, helping to establish the improvised music field as a global domain of practice. The economic rewards are few for Davidson, but it is clear from his comments above—and from how Emanem has consistently put out records for thirty-five years—that he finds enough value in this work to devote a significant amount of time to the endeavour.

Like Martin Davidson, Tim Fletcher—who works outside of the music business—was at most of the performances I went to, so I eventually introduced myself to him and he agreed to an interview. My conversations with Fletcher were formative for how I came to think about improvised music, as his activities as a documentarian are founded on an astute understanding of the musicians' working methods. Fletcher has been recording three to five improvised music performances a week since the mid-1990s, and as a result he has a significant private archive of the London scene; his field recordings made in various venues far outweigh his collection of commercially released recordings. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that he would have time to listen to all recordings he makes himself, let alone to attend to formally released recordings. Many of the improvisers on the scene know Fletcher, and they permit him to record their performances in exchange for copies should they ask him for them; he also has a verbal agreement that the improvisers will retain the rights to the recordings if they are deemed worthy of commercial release. Some of his recordings have been released

commercially on Emanem and other labels, but most of them he simply keeps for posterity in his private collection.

Fletcher described his motivations for doing this work in a way that offered a compelling frame for the kind of "art world" analysis I have been undertaking:

> I feel that it is important to record the small gigs in the back rooms of pubs—the day-to-day sense of the music. Because it is a day-to-day sort of music. For a lot of these people it's their life. Roger Smith [guitar] said an interesting thing in an interview recently—he said he didn't see himself as an artist, but as an artisan. He saw being a musician as an ongoing job. It is not about creating specific works, which I think is the interesting thing about recording it week by week. It's not about the great work, the final version. You can never have the perfect recording, because it contradicts what the whole thing is going on about.

Fletcher's conception of London improv as "a day-to-day sort of music," and improvisers as workers engaged in an ongoing creative process, is a concise reduction of the comments I got from improvisers themselves about their creative work. The improv ethic revolves around the practice of pursuing regular opportunities to play, either publicly or privately, for the purposes of both individual enjoyment and musical experimentation. In much the same way that improvised music is typified by constantly shifting moment-to-moment interactions between musicians, Fletcher's practice is built on a basic conception that the improvised music field, as a social domain, is constructed through the day-to-day activities of improvisers, as they negotiate with each other and the other participants in the field to maximize their opportunities to make music. By attending and recording casual gigs, Fletcher is attempting to capture the way these negotiations play out over long stretches of time. Fletcher's framing of improvised music as about the process rather than the product became the model for this chapter specifically, but also for my general investigation into the relationship between the

social formations and aesthetic ideals that mediate how the London improvised music field functions.

Martin Davidson's efforts with Emanem are just one example of a self-contained independent recording operation; along with organizing their own performances, many improvisers run their own record labels to document their activities and potentially generate extra income. An early example of this kind of initiative is Incus Records, which was formed by Evan Parker, Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley in 1970. Incus, according to the label website, is often referred to as "the first independent, musician run record company in Britain." The site goes on to state: "Overlooking one or two short-lived predecessors in the 1950's, that's probably true. Motivated partly by the ideology of self determination and partly by an absence of an acceptable alternative, the policy is centered on improvisation" (Incus records website: www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk). Parker and Oxley parted ways with Incus in the mid-1980s, and now Karen Brookman-Bailey, Derek Bailey's widow, oversees the operation. Eddie Prévost also runs a label and publishing imprint, Matchless Records, to document his music and that of his colleagues. When I asked Prévost about the paradox between his anti-commodification stance and operating a record company, his reply was something to the effect that this contradiction is a necessity for improvisers within the dominant economic system—he cannot make a living entirely on performing, so the sale of recordings helps to generate capital to support his ongoing creative work. Recordings are a way for musicians to build a following outside of their local territory, and to develop symbolic capital through media reviews and play on relevant radio stations. In the current climate of digital copying and piracy, recordings

are increasingly becoming the primary way for improvisers to generate interest in their live performances, rather than a direct source of revenue in themselves. Musician-run record labels might not generate substantial economic capital for improvisers, as they are catering to a small community of interest, but the combined aesthetic and symbolic value for improvisers means that many are still willing to invest their time and energy in documenting and distributing their music.[2]

According to most of the participants in my study, these independent record labels, and the network of performance venues in London, are almost entirely self-supporting, as the improvisers I spoke to claim to have had little luck securing economic aid from public arts funding bodies, such as Arts Council England. The older improvisers in particular frequently decried the imbalance between state sponsorship of opera, symphonies, and ballets, for example, and the amount of money that is allotted to improvised music. The avoidance of the basic materials of popular music has served to code improvised music as high art to a general audience, but London improv is left to the free market in ways that many improvisers argue the art forms of the 19th century are not.

The London-based improvisers frequently compared their living situations to that of their colleagues in other European countries, particularly the Netherlands, which they perceived as having better state funding for the kind of activities they were engaged in. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter many of the musicians in my study—including Evan Parker, Kenny Wheeler, and the members of AMM—make most of their money, in terms of their musical work, performing in Europe. Kenny Wheeler only

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[2] Other examples of improviser-run labels include Confront (Mark Wastell), Ping Pong Productions (Steve Noble), Psi (Evan Parker), and Stichting Wig (Ig Henneman).

rarely performs in London, but during our interviews he mentioned upcoming recordings in Italy and tours of Germany; he also has a manager to handle his engagements in Europe, but books performances in England himself. In contrast with the ways they were talked about by the English improvisers, the Dutch musicians I spoke with told me that their financial situation has changed for the worse since the formation of the European Union, and that it has become more difficult for them to make a living in their home country. So it seems, based on anecdotal evidence at least, that we are in a moment where the previously lucrative touring circuit in Europe, which supports many musicians in both England and North America, is changing in ways that might adversely affect the global improvised music field.[3]

The absence of equitable support for the arts was a common theme in my discussions with London improvisers, as London improv occupies a complex space between art music (through the intentional aversion to the sonic materials of popular music), commercial music (through a presumed relationship to jazz), and folk music (in terms of the lack of notated compositions and the "illegitimate" modes of acquiring the

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[3] For more on this particular issue, see American guitarist Marc Ribot's article "The Care and Feeding of A Musical Margin," available at http://pirecordings.com/features/musical_margin.html (accessed 30 September 2011).

skills to improvise) (Bourdieu 1984, 25).[4] From my interviews it was clear that most of my subjects felt under-valued in the cultural field, yet there were a variety of opinions on how to negotiate the inequitable distribution of arts funding. Writer and trumpet player Tom Perchard's comments on the issue of government funding for improvised music illuminate the contrasting levels of political engagement that characterize the different generations of London improvisers:

> You're not likely to hear a younger generation musician complain about the lack of funding, or that the arts council won't give them money to do this or that, whereas if you talk to Eddie [Prévost] or Evan [Parker] you'll hear a lot of that, because they're into politics. They've all been members of one sort of political organization or other at one point in their lives. They've been on the ground. To some extent it seems like a worthwhile process for them to engage with political bartering, and that's born of the times. But this is not a politicized generation—we're not involved in political groups, and not interested in politicking. Seymour [Wright] is always applying for funding, and sometimes he gets it. But he doesn't take a kind of 'us against the system' attitude; he tries to fill in the forms really well. If he doesn't get it he puts his things on anyway, and works around the obstacles. That's really the way it's always been—there wouldn't be any free improvising if it wasn't. I don't want to say it's an entrepreneurial approach, but there's a very pragmatic angle to it. People take satisfaction in setting up their own label or gigs.

These thoughts from a member of the younger generation of improvisers (Perchard was in his early thirties at the time of our interview) reiterate issues I have been exploring

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[4] In this context, "illegitimate" refers to learning that takes place outside of formal educational institutions, and to how the skills acquired are not regulated by an external governing body, nor rewarded with elevated social status or job security. The "legitimate" cultural form that troubled many improvisers in my study was classical music; specifically, state-sponsored orchestras, opera houses, and a music education system that prioritized the Western art music tradition. Classical music is legitimized through conservatory or university training, where musicians acquire both skills and credentials—in the form of degrees, diplomas, or being able to say that one studied with a particularly respected teacher—in a carefully regulated environment. These musicians are then subjected to further evaluation through formal auditions to join orchestras, pursue solo work, or to become teachers themselves. In contrast, most improvisers and folk musicians are self taught (or at least learn their skills outside of an institutional context), don't acquire formal accreditation (degrees, diplomas), and cannot expect the kind of long-term job security that comes with membership in an orchestra or a teaching position at a conservatory or university. The improvisers in my study believed their art to be as important and worthy of public support as other musics, yet the system as it is offers little hope for even the best-known improvisers to ever be financially compensated for their work in the ways that successful members of the commercial or "legitimate" music field are.

throughout this analysis of the economics of the improvised music field, specifically around how the field persists through pragmatic actions based on a belief in the value of free improvisation as an artistic practice. As Perchard says, first generation improvisers Eddie Prévost and Evan Parker were involved at different times in government committees that dealt with arts funding, and both fought to secure better support for improvisers—Prévost was on the board of the Jazz Centre Society in the early 1980s (which was the forerunner to Jazz Services, a jazz advocacy body based in London that organizes tours, concerts, and educational initiatives throughout the UK), and Parker was on the jazz sub-committee of the Arts Council England in the early 1970s. They are both no longer involved at the government level, but continue to lobby these and other bodies for representation and balanced funding. My experience with younger improvisers reflects Perchard's description of his contemporaries; these people seem less inclined to work with the "change from within the system" model, and put on their performances whether their applications for funding are successful or not, if they bother to apply at all. Therefore, the musician-run independent record labels and door gigs constitute an network of organization that runs parallel to, yet mostly outside of, the "legitimate" systems of cultural production to which government arts-funding bodies and profit-based corporations attend.[5]

Alan Wilkinson's approach to organizing public performances is an example of the pragmatism that informs the improv ethic, and like many other improvisers I spoke

[5] Again, this situation is not unique to improvised music, as popular musicians seeking to establish themselves must also pass-the-hat at performances and finance their own recordings, as must avant-garde music composers who don't find other employment, either in educational institutions or the general labour market. Improvised music is distinct from these two examples however, as the field has very little circulating economic capital to aspire to as a full-time performer, and few jobs related to the practice of free improvisation (such as teaching improvisation in a university) that could support an ongoing musical practice.

to he positioned his efforts as an oppositional act against the public arts funding system. Unlike other improvisers however, Wilkinson frames his ethic of "getting on with it" as a sign of the vitality and importance of improvised music:

> I think one of the strengths of the British art scenes in general, like any area of left field art that is poorly financed by the government, is that it happens in spite of everything. Which means that artists are quite strong as a result, because you have to be quite determined to carry on, as no one on high appreciates you at all.

In Wilkinson's assessment, the harsh climate improvisers work in generates a strength of purpose that results in compelling art, for if one is not particularly dedicated to the creative and social values represented by the practice of improvisation, then one will not last very long in the improvised music field. Regular Wilkinson collaborator Steve Noble added to this "strength through adversity" notion by suggesting that the kind of subjective satisfaction Perchard alluded to is a necessary foundation for working in the field:

> In England you're kind of own your own, as there's not a good feeling from the people who you would assume would help support this area of music, like the arts bodies. You have to find a way of surviving. Part of that is enjoyment—if you're not enjoying doing the gig, what are you doing this music for?

Martin Davidson and Tim Fletcher clearly fit within Noble's paradigm of enjoyment and individual satisfaction, as they continue to produce recordings that document the scene despite structural and economic limitations. Wilkinson and Noble themselves have been active on the London scene for over two decades, so clearly both find enough meaning and enjoyment in the music to continue to perform for door money. But there is also a political component to the decision to make improvised music, which supplements the basic enjoyment derived from acts of creation and social interaction with like-minded individuals. Barre Phillips explained his motivation to focus his

activities on improvised music in political terms: “When I made a choice to play improvised music it was for social reasons, to take a stance. In the overall scene, it’s important that there is the improvised music experience, next to the commercial use of music.” The musical imperative of “getting on with it,” of assuming the importance of free improvisation as a form of expression within the wider cultural field, is a defining characteristic of the ethos that mediates the London improvised music field. This imperative is articulated through the kinds of decisions participants make to pursue (or attend) performance situations that might not be economically lucrative, but that allow them the creative freedom to make the music they want.

II – Courting Conventions and Spatial Dimensions

The above description of the basic economic structures of the improvised music field, and the related work ethic of improvisers, is intended to provide context for thinking about how London improv is produced and consumed. From this theoretical foundation it is possible to move into an analysis of the specific performance practices of London improv. The following investigation will loosely follow performance theorist Richard Schechner’s analytical model for describing cultural events, which involves addressing five key points: “1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4) rules. Often special places—non-ordinary places—are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in” (2003, 8). A musical performance obviously attaches special value to instruments, and in the preceding chapters I addressed some of the rules that determine the sound of improvised music performances. So in this section I will attend to some of the more

mundane aspects of improvised music performance. This kind of analysis is based on Schechner's (2003) basic argument that the fundamental assumptions, conventions, and locations of performances are no less important than the creative and political ideals that motivate the participants.

London improv continues to be determined by a modernist/avant-garde conception born out of the originary break with its formative influences of jazz and classical music, so the rhetoric around the music reveals an uneasy relationship to notions of performance conventions and genre fixity. To address this issue, I will again turn to Howard Becker, who offers a useful framework for thinking about how even radical artistic shifts depend on standard performance conventions:

> As with political revolutions, no matter how much changes, much stays the same. Composers may use new sounds and notations; musicians may play their instruments in unfamiliar ways and use new kinds of equipment. But composers still produce scores which, however unconventional, function as parts that the performers read and use to guide their performance; performers play in public events called concerts or recitals, lasting a conventional two hours or so; audiences attend at a specific time and sit quietly while the performers play, frequently having bought tickets to the event as a result of learning about it through publicity and newspaper stories. So composers, performers, audiences, ticket sellers, renters of halls, and publicity people still cooperate to produce these events, even though the nature of the event has changed. (Becker 1982, 307)

Despite the radical political rhetoric, dissonant sonic materials, and unorthodox instrumental techniques that characterize London improv, improvised music performances are structured in much the same way as other musics, sharing many qualities with jazz performances in particular; usually they take place in a space with some sort of separation between audience and musicians, the performance is normally divided into sets, each set is approximately forty-five minutes to one hour long, the audience sits quietly, listens, claps between pieces, and has usually paid to be there. In

addition to these performance conventions, the commodification of the music in recorded form is also similar to other musics, with the compact disc as the main medium of documentation, the same methods of distribution (record shops, mail order, digital downloads), and similar conventions around recording either live or in the studio. So although the rhetoric around improvised music retains a character we might associate with discussions of political revolutions, in practice the music manifests through long-established conventions relating to spaces, media systems, and patterns of work that are fundamental to the way music is produced and consumed in Western society.

In previous chapters I introduced some basic thoughts about the venues for London improv, and how different participants in the scene favour different locations—some like to work in clubs, others prefer to work in environments where the focus is more clearly on the music than on the business of selling food and drink. While in London I attended performances of improvised music in a wide variety of spaces: concert halls, university auditoriums, a vault under London Bridge, church basements, and on a boat floating on the Thames River, for example. But clubs and pubs are still the most common setting for the day-to-day practice of improvised music; performances in other spaces are marked differently, by which I mean they occur less frequently, are booked well in advance, and tend to be advertised as special events.

Pubs, as the main venue for public socializing in London, are obvious settings for the performance of improvised music. Besides their ubiquitous presence in English social life, many pubs have the structural advantage of a back room or upstairs space that is separated from the main bar area. The existence of such spaces was essential to

the initial development of the improvised music scene in London, for they provided a location for experimental music making that was accessible to the public, yet isolated from the distractions and noises of other public spaces. The Red Rose Club, as I described it in the previous section, was a good example of this performing situation. The revenue generated by selling alcohol in the front of the pub meant that the musicians were left alone to do what they wished in the back room, so there was no need to make music to please a general audience. However, the reconfiguring of the back room of the Red Rose Club into a snooker hall in 2008 perhaps signals a larger shift in the ways that pub owners are using their resources; the leftover spaces in London that once were an affordable venue for improvised music are increasingly being transformed into more reliable revenue generating units.

Although many pubs in London have the advantage of ready-made infrastructure for music events, the non-commercial character of improvised music means that the organizers of door gigs cannot guarantee an audience, or a profit for those who own the spaces. The example of The Red Rose Club withdrawing its welcome for music events is a reminder that pubs are private businesses. As a result, pubs are only part of the ever-shifting network of venues in London—many performances take place in less conventional spaces, and improvisers have had to be resourceful in finding new locations in which to play. The late percussionist John Stevens was particularly known for his ability to convince art gallery curators, church administrators, warehouse owners, and anyone else with a suitable room to allow improvised music to be performed in their spaces. Improvised music shares this

problem with finding venues for non-commercial art with other performance-based art forms; Richard Schechner described a similar situation in the theatre field:

> Environmental theatres—built in cheap hit-and-run spaces, often in out-of-the-way neighbourhoods—exemplify a resistance and alternative to the conglomerates. But environmental theatres exist only in the creases of contemporary society, living off the leavings, like cockroaches. (2003, 183)

Improvised music generally requires less equipment and space than theatre, so the alternative spaces in which I heard improvised music were not quite as colourful as those Schechner describes, but many of them do lack the basic comforts we might associate with dedicated music clubs.

The equivalent venues to Schechner's "environmental theatres" in the London improvised music field are rooms not originally intended for music, so there may not be a stage, a piano, a sound system, or any of the other materials one might expect to find in a proper music venue. Steve Noble, who has worked in many different performance environments, offered a fairly comprehensive description of the two basic venue models in the London scene:

> There has always been a very strong working class line through the improvised music scene—sort of 'no nonsense', or no pretension. And pubs sort of provide that. On the other hand, when the LMC [London Musicians Collective] had its place with the filmmakers' co-op in Gloucester near Camden, in an old rail building, they had a little office space with nothing in it. The performance space had chairs and little heaters, but no bar and no toilet. So it was very functional, and a great place to play. But it didn't have anything to offer apart from the music. If you wanted to get a beer, you had to cross the road. Drink has always been a big part of it, so pubs provide that when you play in one.

The performance space offered by the London Musicians Collective clearly had few luxuries. It ran on a volunteer basis and had no income other than donations and contributions at the door. These sorts of alternative venues have had a direct influence on the kind of music that improvisers make. For example, the scarcity of pianos in

alternative venues has meant that piano players such as Steve Beresford have had to diversify their performance practices. Beresford often performs on analog electronic instruments, amplified found objects, and toy instruments he finds in dollar stores; he has made a virtue of this necessity, and developed a highly individual and creative musical language on tiny sound-generating objects that he can carry to the venues in a backpack. In a similar move, Steve Noble has had to pare his drum kit down to a minimum of parts for ease of transportation and to maximize room on stage. These improvisers are willing to make these kinds of concessions in exchange for the creative freedom that non-commercial spaces provide.

The loft scene in New York City in the 1970s is a well-documented example of the trend towards musician-organized performances in found spaces. George Lewis, who was a prominent participant in the New York loft scene, described the scene in a way that translates easily onto the present description of the situation in London:

> The loft network developed as part of the general move among experimental musicians to develop performance environments that eschewed the codes and genre policing of conventional jazz and classical performance… These newer art worlds needed alternative spaces in order to get their experimental work before the public, expanding the set of positions available for the music. (2008, 349)

The loft scene in New York City seems somewhat equivalent to the pub scene in London, as these were pre-existing public/private spaces where improvisers could arrange performances of experimental music. According to Lewis such spaces have been in the decline since the 1980s, because, like the pubs in London, 'blank' urban spaces are increasingly being converted for maximum revenue generation. The imperative to maximize creative freedom means that improvisers are continually searching for new spaces that will allow them to pursue their creative ideals, which

results in a constantly shifting network of venues that generate their money from sources other than the music, and spaces where the music is the focus but the environment is less comfortable.

III – Identifying the Improviser

My analysis of the London improvised music field in this chapter has been constructed primarily in economic terms, which in conjunction with Becker's frame of the artist as worker has privileged the notion of the professional musician. The ideal of the full-time artist is dominant in discussions of culture in Western society, as I think most artists would rather be paid to create art than do the kinds of work that pays for the other necessities and privileges of life. But, as is clear by this point, improvised music is not a popular art, so, to repeat Eddie Prévost's assertion from the beginning of this chapter, improvisers must "tread a difficult and often painfully compromising path through the market economy in order to secure a living" (1995, 89). Based on my discussions with other improvisers, Prévost's comment is slightly problematic—or perhaps just unrealistic—as it presupposes that it is an ethical compromise for improvisers to play other musics, and that taking on non-musical work is difficult and painful. Not all the improvisers I spoke with shared Prévost's stance on playing other musics, and many of those who worked other jobs took personal satisfaction both in the work itself, and in knowing that this work generated the necessary capital to enable them a high degree of creative freedom. In our conversation Prévost framed his argument slightly differently than he does in his book, and his comments reveal the conceptual binary within the cultural field between the full-time artist and the casual worker:

> People who have gone to music college get this obsession about making a career out of it. It's understandable. But you're almost certainly going to hate music in the end, unless you're very, very lucky. Keep your music special. Do something else that can earn you a living if you really are passionate about music. It's the passion that you need to keep, and you will lose it if you insist on it being the main focus of your living, because you're going to be driven to do things on your instrument that you don't want to do. And you'll end up hating music and yourself, and probably give up.

So the creative and ethical ideals that inform the position of improviser in London are tempered by a high degree of pragmatism, as those who are interested in making this music take a variety of paths to get to the moments where they perform improvised music. The following paragraphs will present a series of specific examples to illustrate the complex relationship between creative priorities and social realities that mediate the day-to-day performance of London improv.

The two basic models of improviser I have been working with so far might be characterized as the professional and the amateur, but such a reduction is inaccurate at best, and pejorative at worst. This binary presupposes the existence of an economic system where skills are exchanged for money. Such a system usually involves an institutional framework to regulate and accredit the acquisition of the essential techniques of a field, and a multilayered structure to position subjects according to their proficiency in the desired skill. Bourdieu (1984) refers to this model as "legitimate" culture, which he bases on the career trajectory of skilled classical music performers from students in a conservatory (accredited acquisition of skills) to members of a state and/or corporate sponsored orchestra. I used Bourdieu's framing of "illegitimate" culture in Chapter Three to describe the position of London improv within the cultural field, and it is equally useful here for deconstructing the professional/amateur binary. The preceding analysis of the economic structure of the improvised music field should

have made it clear that it differs substantially from other musical fields that have clear divisions of labour between those we might refer to as artists and those who provide support for the art. The low economic stakes, the system of underground venues, the informal training process, and the grassroots organizational structure of the improvised music field more closely resembles a folk music paradigm than the professional/trade model represented in the classical music field, for example.[6] There is a clear hierarchy within the improvised music field in terms of symbolic capital, but on the day-to-day level, at least in my experience in London, even the well-known musicians play door gigs in their local communities.

Other trends in the field align improvised music with the folk music paradigm. For example, Eddie Prévost's workshop bears a notable similarity to Irish music sessions I have witnessed at pubs in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the participants set up in a separate room from the main bar, and anyone who knows the repertoire is welcome to join in. I have also noted a recent trend towards house concerts in both folk and improvised music, where interested listeners (or musicians themselves) bypass the

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[6] My use of the term "folk music" in this context is intended to refer to the community of people for whom music making is an essential part of their lives, but who do necessarily base their activities on the notion of "making it" in the music business. Their musical skills are very specific to the particular kind of music they want to make, rather than orientated either towards the kind of flexibility required to work in a variety of musical contexts, or to acquiring the skills to compete for secure musical jobs, such as symphony orchestras. Such musicians frequently congregate in self-organized music making sessions in pubs, community centres, or private homes, and play traditional, rather than original, songs. This collective performance of a shared repertoire I argue has a parallel in improvised performances, where musicians who may have never played together before draw on a shared sense of what free improvisation sounds like to generate their performances. Yet I acknowledge that this characterization of folk music is idealized in its own way, for the folk music scene has its own hierarchy that resembles that of other musics. Folk musicians, especially those playing original songs, can aspire to work their way through the low/no-paying network of informal performances, underground venues, and open-mic style performances to play at the more prestigious and lucrative folk festivals and concert circuit that currently signify that one has "made it" as a performer. There are some opportunities for improvisers to do the same, but the difficulty of their music limits access to the kind of public and private support that is accorded to other, more accessible musics, keeping the majority of improvised music making on the cultural and economic margins.

venue system entirely and organize performances in their homes. These structural similarities reflect an organizational system that does not always equate skill with fame or economic gain/potential, or measure commitment and creativity through either official accreditation or sheer number of performances. The improvisers I spoke with who might in another field be classified as amateurs because they work a day job, may be the most fiercely committed to improvised music, as they are uninterested in making music in any other way and arrange their lives to support it. Therefore, in analyzing patterns of work and positing various models to account for the social practices of improvisers, it becomes necessary to shift the standard paradigm away from the value judgements contained in the notion of professional and amateur, towards a continuum of practices based on a shared ideal around what it means to make creative music.

The full-time improviser is an increasingly rare find, and in my research group it is mostly the older, first generation improvisers who have been able to maintain a career playing improvised music exclusively; most of the younger improvisers in my study either play other musics, teach privately or in schools, or have jobs that have nothing to do with music. The full-time improvisers need to travel frequently, taking gigs as they are offered and being "on" for the audiences when they take the stage. Evan Parker was a common reference point for other improvisers when they spoke about the few players who make their living playing improvised music. Barre Phillips fits in this category as well, and his comments about Parker illustrate the kinds of demands placed on working improvisers: "It's great that Evan [Parker] can do all that travelling. It's the name of the game. If you're not into the travelling, when you have a particular thing and are a soloist like he is, then you're going to have trouble getting enough work." As an

example of how the improvised music field currently functions, Evan Parker came to Toronto in the winter of 2009 to play with some local improvisers at an art space dedicated to improvised music, and far more people came to hear him than ever attend a performance by local players. I was able to contrast this situation with my experiences attending Evan Parker's performances in his home city of London, where, in a striking parallel, his audiences were comparatively smaller than those that came to see visiting American improvisers. This situation illustrates that in the improvised music field, like other music fields, visiting performers draw more of an audience than local players, which means that for even the most well-known improvisers a life dedicated to making improvised music requires foregoing a secure financial situation and taking on the difficult life of a touring artist.

Barre Phillips has followed a similar pattern of work to Evan Parker, and has managed to work exclusively as an improviser for almost forty years. Phillips's decision to work as an improviser was dependent on his willingness to forgo certain life comforts:

> I guess sometime around 1975 I had a real choice. I could have chosen to make myself a place in the European jazz scene as a jazz musician, either as a freelance guy or a bandleader. I saw how the scene worked, and could have slogged through it. But I felt that it was more important to play this music, which meant finding a way to afford to do it. So we developed a very low budget living situation, where we lived for ten years without a telephone or electricity.

Phillips's "low budget living situation" is a medieval chapel in a rural area of southern France he has been renovating since the early 1970s, which means that along with living without basic amenities, the vast majority of his work involves travelling. The ideal of making a living off of creative cultural work still motivates many improvisers, but current economic realities mean that younger improvisers must devote more of their

time to the necessities of living and less to music. Phillips has a particularly informed perspective on this trend, as his son is an improvising bass player who lives in New York City:

> There's no question of asking how one can make a living off of this music, because it's impossible. The young musicians aren't even dreaming about that. They do it because they love to play together and the music sounds good. For them it's about getting an education, getting the teaching job, getting the material thing organized, and if there's still time to play some music, then doing it. More and more I think that's how it's going to have to be.

This assessment of the field again recalls the folk music paradigm, where participants create the music that is meaningful to them without expectation of their labours being transferable into economic capital. The conventional understanding of folk music clearly conflicts with the high art aspirations and dissonant sonic materials of London improv, so the connection I am making is at the socio-economic level, rather than suggesting any similarity in the sounds. Phillips's description of the differences between his and his son's lives marks a generational shift away from the model represented by the professional touring jazz musician towards that of the skilled amateur who uses their work in other areas to support their musical activities.

My intention with these anecdotal accounts is to underscore that even at the top of the improvised music field, improvisers' activities are regulated by fairly serious economic constraints, and they must make substantial sacrifices to pursue their musical imperatives. The example of Phillips and Parker reminds us that we are in a moment when many of the originary figures of London improv are still working in the field. These first generation improvisers have accumulated a significant amount of symbolic capital as representatives of the formative era of the music, so they are well positioned to receive the small amount of economic capital that circulates in the improvised music

field, although they clearly still have to work quite hard to get it. In a description of Derek Bailey's position in the field, David Borgo underscores how the improvised music field, despite its discursive framing as a communitarian form of artistic expression, is subject to the same kinds of organizational rules that regulate conventional musical fields:

> While the improvised music world seems insulated from the rapid fads and fashions of the music industry on a whole—in both desirable and undesirable ways—even here the logic of networks can be hard to dispute. Derek Bailey often adamantly denounces his title as one of the 'grandfathers' of free improvisation, but his career and creative work is still shaped in dramatic ways by the network that has bequeathed him this 'dubious' honor. (2005, 165)

Bailey, Parker, and Phillips's respective positions as formative figures in the music, and that they established themselves at a time when it was possible to live for much less than it costs now to live in an urban centre, means that they can occupy rarefied positions in the improvised music field. These first generation improvisers continue to be models for other improvisers who would like to focus more of their energies on their musical practices, but the particular elevated positions they occupy in the field are becoming less and less available to younger musicians, as the networks that regulate musical production in Western society continue to privilege those who came to prominence in the formative years of the field.

Given this situation, younger participants in the improvised music field have had to develop alternative models of living that enable them to produce the kinds of music that interest them. Bassist Dominic Lash, a young musician who is just beginning to make a name for himself in the London improvised music field, provided a framework for thinking about the patterns of work that currently characterize the position of improviser:

> People make decisions to play this music. The choice becomes, certainly for the younger musicians, to either get another job or play music that is not freely improvised. The Evan Parkers and Derek Baileys of the world have made a living playing improvised music, but there are probably only about fifty people worldwide who can do it.

Second generation improvisers such as Steve Noble and John Edwards negotiate this situation by being less restrictive about the music they play than Parker, Bailey, Phillips, Prévost, and other first generation improvisers. Noble and Edwards play commercial musics to make money, yet primarily identify as improvisers even as they are engaged in playing functional jazz or popular music. These practices situate Edwards and Noble within the professional musician model, as they have taken the time to develop the necessary skills to make themselves employable within most musical areas that require bass and drums. Yet in terms of their self directed creative projects, both of these players primarily pursue opportunities to make improvised music; their work in the popular music and jazz fields is in the role of side players. But even the presumed ethical compromise around playing other musics implied by Lash and Prévost does not necessarily result in financial stability, as Edwards's and Noble's continued devotion to improvised music means that they prioritize projects that are creatively, rather than economically, rewarding. These priorities, in conjunction with the general decline in commercial music work means that these individuals still struggle to make a living wage from playing music.

The difficulties of making a living as a musician, no matter what the field, led many of the improvisers in my study to take on other jobs. Some are involved in teaching music, both privately and in the formal education system, but others I spoke with work in areas that have nothing to do with music, from teaching English as a

second language to working as an accountant for the London municipal government. For some improvisers these kinds of decisions are based on creative priorities as well as a basic sense of pragmatism—they are not at all interested in making any other kind of music, or in developing the kinds of musicianship skills required to work as a professional musician. Bassist Dominic Lash described one specific example that typifies the way improvisers in this corner of the London scene structure their musical activities: "Think of Eddie's [Prévost] workshop, and Nat Catchpole [saxophone]. He was an accomplished young jazzer and made the decision to work at day jobs to pay his bills, so the only music he would do would be the improvised stuff." This exclusive focus on improvised music involves taking a clear aesthetic stance, and working on these ideals with a small pool of improvisers in particular performance situations. By choosing to focus their music making activities exclusively on free improvisation, the people who take on other jobs are not necessarily demonstrating a lack of commitment to their music, but asserting a creative freedom that they believe is more difficult to maintain for those who try to work as full-time musicians.

Saxophonist Seymour Wright is a compelling example of an improviser who rejects the professional/amateur binary. Wright works as an English teacher, and in our conversation he described his personal relationship to these labels:

> I think you can be a profoundly committed musician without being a professional, and that you can be a fantastic musician without being a professional. [Eddie Prévost's group] AMM are not professional musicians—well, they are now, but they weren't when they started in the 1960s. And they're still not making any money at it. You can certainly be a freer musician if you're not a professional.

He went on to explain what he imagined to be unique about the group of musicians who attend Eddie Prévost's workshop, and his description reveals a particularly rigorous approach to improvised music:

> The defining thing about the workshop school is that we've all got other things that are our jobs, so we're not beholden to producing or projecting anything. It doesn't matter if we do concerts and it doesn't matter if we make records, because we don't need to. It's completely different from trying to be a professional musician, and allows us to make different music than professional musicians. I've often thought that if I was trying to be a professional musician, I would be beholden to the consumers who were asking me to play. For example, if someone bought *Hornbill*, that solo recording I did, and asked me to go play in Toronto, if I went and didn't play like that they might be disappointed. I'm not interested in that at all. I think I'm much more concerned with procedure than with product.

Wright's notions about his creative work revolve around the idea that it is possible to make more creative music if the musician does not depend on the support of the free market. These comments align with Tom Perchard's description of the government funding system from earlier in this chapter, in which he mentions Wright's practice of applying for government funding, and then putting on his projects whether he gets the funding or not. Such a situation means that Wright and his colleagues are willing to invest their economic capital—derived from their non-musical work—into their creative projects.

Wright has to work hard to generate performance opportunities, often booking, promoting, and setting up chairs at the venue himself, occasionally taking a loss if attendance is not what he had hoped. But this extra work is clearly worth it to him for the freedom to make the kind of improvised music he and his colleagues want to make. The most memorable performance I attended that Wright organized did not take place in a conventional venue like the Red Rose, but in the vaults beneath London Bridge. The

use of different spaces than those more specifically connected to the day-to-day performances of improvised music is typical of this particular alternative model of organization; Wright still works with the basic framework of performance as the main location for improvised music, yet through a self-conscious engagement with the larger field of power he and other musicians have made a space for themselves outside of the micro-economy of the improvised music field, based on their willingness to use their personal resources to produce and present just the music they want to be involved with. The activities of these improvisers require a conceptual shift away from the over-determining professional musician frame that has been the basis of my economic analysis of the London improvised music field, towards a more inclusive paradigm that reflects the creative ways that subjects structure their lives around functioning as producers of alternative culture.

The preceding analysis is intended to provide context for understanding the practice of free improvisation, at least as the participants in my study enact and experience it. Improvisers continue to define their music against the conventions and materials of popular music, so pursuing an interest in creating improvised music automatically positions one outside of the dominant economic structures that regulate and reward the creation of commercially focused music. Improvised music shares this position on the margins with any number of other experimental art fields, including literature, theatre, and visual art. The majority of those who currently claim the identity of improviser operate with the assumption that playing improvised music is not a reliable means of generating economic capital, and that they will have to find a balance between music making and other work that will allow them to be creatively fulfilled.

The basic commitment to function as producers of alternative culture motivates contemporary improvisers in the same way that it did the first generation of musicians who founded the field, and the variety of choices improvisers make to pursue this commitment demonstrates the continued importance of music in constructing a sense of self within an economic system that prioritizes consumption rather than production of culture.

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