

WEIRD BODILY NOISES:  
IMPROVISING RACE, GENDER, AND JAZZ HISTORY

By

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores avant-garde jazz in Kansas City in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to find out how they both reproduce and complicate narratives of jazz history and norms of race and gender. Working in a city associated with an historical subgenre—“Kansas City Jazz”—and in a style whose histories limit avant-garde activity largely to New York City, these musicians pay respect to that history even while their performances complicate it. As practices of improvisation that use music, dance, costumes, and visual art, their performances highlight the embodied aspects of identity—the ways that bodies move with and against norms of race and gender and through space. My dissertation thus seeks to show how local, avant-garde, improvised performances can speak about power relations on a broader scale.

The title of my dissertation indicates three primary questions for this study: How do experimental performances that seem “weird” both challenge and reproduce normative ways of thinking about race, gender, and power? In what ways are bodies constrained aesthetically, socially, and historically, and how do they improvise within those constraints? How do avant-garde performances complicate the dominant history of jazz, making it “noisy”? This interdisciplinary study relies on several methodologies, including ethnographic interviews and participant-observation, oral history, and archival research.

Chapter One establishes historical precedent for avant-garde jazz in Kansas City by examining performances and performers in the 1960’s, showing how local musicians in the scene both complicated and reproduced dominant historical narratives about one of the “cradles of jazz.” Chapter Two analyzes several recent performances in Kansas City that use humor and the bodily noise of laughter to point out and critique social inequities while also reproducing social

hierarchies. Chapter Three explores the complex questions of appropriation, cultural borrowing, and influence that arise when three white musicians in Kansas City cross imaginary racial lines to perform avant-garde music. Chapter Four looks closely at several performers associated with musician Mark Southerland, whose “wearable horn sculptures” highlight the role of the body in improvisation while they both reinforce and complicate normative gender roles.

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## INTRODUCTION

### SOUNDING OUT WEIRD BODILY NOISES

*In a nightclub in Kansas City, MO, a woman in a brightly colored Spandex suit stands at the front of the stage. The suit covers almost her entire body, leaving only her face, hands, and feet exposed. A brass tube curves over her right shoulder and around her right breast, ending in a small saxophone-like bell. A similar bell protrudes from the middle of her abdomen. Just inches behind her stands a tall man in a bright, multi-colored robe and hood that covers his entire body. He blows into a saxophone mouthpiece attached directly to the brass tubes curving around the woman's body. A warbling, reedy sound emanates from the saxophone bells, playing a vocal-like, plaintive cry as the woman slowly moves her hips from side to side. As the melody continues, she slowly lifts her left hand, bending her arm at the elbow. She twists her wrist and rolls her fingers, as if physically manipulating the sounds coming out of the bells.*

\* \* \*

*The gathering of 100 or so revelers, wearing bright costumes of dime-store sequined masks, feather boas, and face paint in purple, green, and gold, moves east down 18<sup>th</sup> St. Many of them play instruments—trumpets, saxophones, guitars, bass and snare drums, washboard, flutes, and other hand percussion. Informally organized versions of “Iko Iko” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” play up and down the loose column of people, led mostly by the drummers near the front of the parade. The parade proceeds down a mostly deserted street, near empty warehouses and office buildings closed for the day, and past the occasional art gallery or bar.*

*Parade leaders, dressed in white and carrying feathered fans, occasionally herd participants into the right lane of the street so that cars can pass by on the left, yelling, “Keep that lane open!” As the group nears the intersection of 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets., the entrance to Kansas City’s historic Jazz District, a loud, celebratory cheer goes up.*

\* \* \*

This dissertation explores the weird bodily noises of avant-garde jazz performances in Kansas City in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to find out how they both reproduce and complicate narratives of jazz history and norms of race and gender. Working in a city associated with its own historical subgenre—“Kansas City Jazz”—and in a style whose histories limit avant-garde jazz activity largely to New York City, these performers pay tribute to that history even while their performances challenge it. Those performances, as practices of improvisation that use music, dance, costumes, and visual art, highlight the embodied aspects of identity—the ways that bodies move with and against norms of race and gender and through space. My dissertation thus seeks to show how local, avant-garde, improvised performances have something to tell us about human interaction, identity, and history on a larger scale, as well as the creative ways humans interact with the social norms that define and constrict us.

The dominant public imaginary of jazz, as in racist discourse on a broader scale, depicts non-white bodies as inherently “free” both emotionally and sexually, and white bodies as repressed and constricted. This discourse is in direct opposition to the material conditions of these bodies throughout history—non-white bodies have been bound and restricted by freely moving white bodies. The discourse of ostensibly free non-white bodies also depicts these bodies

as highly sexualized, virile, animalistic, emasculated, and feminized; the history of minstrelsy is but one example. Furthermore, scholars of race and minstrelsy have argued that white performers who cross the imaginary racial line between white and non-white inhabited black bodies in order to experience by proxy the sexual and emotional freedom ascribed to black bodies. Traditional histories of jazz depict the music as breaking with these norms in the intellectual activity of bebop and the destruction of all musical constraints in avant-garde jazz—a destruction that, depending on who tells it, either signaled the “death of jazz” in the 1960’s or the romanticized beginning of a new music free from the bounds of history and genre.<sup>1</sup>

Despite associations of improvisation with freedom in the public imagination, complex power relations of race and gender remain; performances that ostensibly illustrate “freedom” can both challenge and reproduce normative concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. Some recent improvised performances of music and dance—primarily “avant-garde” or experimental ones that stretch traditional definitions of “jazz”—continue to demonstrate these complex power relations. In “Weird Bodily Noises: Improvising Race, Gender, and Jazz History,” I raise three

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<sup>1</sup> For the “death of jazz” scenario, see jazz critics Ira Gitler and Ralph Gleason on the avant-garde in *Down Beat* magazine in the 1960’s. For a more recent version of the same argument, see Ken Burns, *Jazz*, (Washington, D.C.: Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD. For the romantic view of avant-garde jazz, see Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994); Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984). For jazz studies analysis of these discourses, see Iain Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3, Literature of Jazz (1991); John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Salim Washington, “All the Things You Could Be by Now’: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

primary questions to investigate improvisation, race, and gender: How do avant-garde or experimental performances both challenge and reproduce normative ways of thinking about race, gender, and power—that is, how are they “weird”? In what ways are the bodies of musicians and dancers in jazz performances—or any bodies, by extension—constrained aesthetically, socially, and historically, and how do they improvise within those constraints? How do experimental or avant-garde performances complicate the dominant history of jazz, making it “noisy”? Listening for weird bodily noises entails exploring the ways improvisation not only models liberatory social practices but also reproduces hierarchical ones. It also means paying attention to bodies as raced and gendered, gesturing grandly or barely moving, constrained and free. And it means listening for the ways that these moving bodies make historical noises that critique dominant narratives of the past but also reinforce those narratives.

As a case study for these questions, my project focuses on the recent work of several performers based in Kansas City, which, along with New Orleans, Chicago, and New York City, is widely considered one of the “cradles of jazz.” For instance, saxophonist, composer, and sculptor Mark Southerland’s use of his “wearable horn sculptures” draw attention to the roles of moving, improvising, gendered bodies in jazz. Other performances that feature improvised music and movement question traditional definitions of jazz performance practices through the potentially subversive use of humor, “carnavalesque” improvisation, dance, and visual art. Many white avant-garde jazz performers in Kansas City, from the 1960’s to the present, cite as influences the musical and visual aesthetics of black composer, bandleader, and philosopher Sun Ra; such professed allegiance to black avant-gardism presents opportunities to explore the often problematic ways white musicians cross imaginary racial lines to borrow or appropriate black culture in order to rebel against the white mainstream. Furthermore, the racialized geography of

Kansas City in the twentieth century has shaped what gets heard as jazz or “avant-garde” and thus how these performers negotiate spatial and genre boundaries. My dissertation thus examines the complex power relations at play in improvised music, movement, place, and jazz history, arguing that, as improvisation both reflects and models wider social relationships, it contains the potential for both oppression and liberation.<sup>2</sup>

## **Weird**

To explore these issues further, I will elucidate the three operative terms of my title. “Weird” usually describes something that is strange, bizarre, out of the ordinary, mysterious, abnormal, or unnatural. When we describe something as weird, we often mean that we cannot categorize it using dominant epistemologies. Encountering something weird forces us to reconsider our notions of what is normal, standard, or “real.” The weird thus makes us feel strange, uneasy, and unsettled, always complicating our simplistic worldview. The weird lurks on the borders of our deeply held belief systems, crossing the boundaries between what we accept as truth and what we banish as falsehood. The ghostly presence of the weird reminds us of the past but can also warn us about the future. The etymology of the word highlights several of its qualities that further explain my use of it in this dissertation—gender, race, sound, and the future.

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<sup>2</sup> I use “avant-garde jazz” throughout this dissertation to describe most of the musical practices I encountered in my research, although other terms might apply: experimentalism, free jazz, free improvisation, creative improvisation. Specifically, I use “jazz” to suggest a historical link between much of the improvised music of the present in Kansas City and the musical practices throughout the history of jazz in Kansas City and elsewhere. I use “avant-garde jazz” as a kind of shorthand for the diverse sounds of Kansas City’s scene, recognizing that ultimately all such labels can limit how music is heard, distributed, and consumed.

The oldest use of the word comes from Old English in the first century CE, when it stood for the force that predetermines events such as fate or destiny. The noun took the feminine form *wyrd*, and by the eighth century came to refer to the Fates, the three sisters of Greek and Roman mythology and Germanic and Nordic folktales, who foretold or possibly determined the destinies of all beings, spinning out the thread of life for each person. The Weird Sisters represent a feminine power that has authority over all life and knows the ultimate destinies of all humans. They are a danger to patriarchy and perhaps a literary manifestation of male anxiety about powerful women. Their power comes from their knowledge of something outside the scope of mortal (read: male) thought—the future. Since they know when men will die, their knowledge is terrible, and men are afraid of them. In this sense, the Weird Sisters can predict the fall of the current order and the collapse present hierarchies. They also create the future—they spin it out on their looms, weaving the fabric of the future. Thus their knowledge is also constructive—they not only tell the future from a distance, but they make the future happen through a creative act.

By the seventeenth century, “weird” came to describe witches or soothsayers more broadly, representing a wide array of mortal beings with special, supernatural abilities. Shakespeare’s Three Witches in *Macbeth* who foretell Macbeth’s rise and fall are but one example of this instance of the weird sisters. As beings who straddle the line between the mortal and the supernatural, they confuse and frighten most mortal beings with their dual existence and their knowledge of other worlds. Their chant of “fair is foul and foul is fair” indicates that they see things differently from mortal men and oppose common knowledge. They literally and figuratively stir the pot (“Double, bubble, toil, and trouble / fire burn and cauldron bubble) by confounding Macbeth’s desires to rule and confusing him with odd language. The weird also then complicates and troubles prevailing wisdom, crossing back and forth between two separate

worlds and gaining knowledge from that crossing. This knowledge gives its pronouncements a critical edge.

Since the weird is a feminine power that threatens the current order, it could also be applied to race, especially when considering the ways heteronormativity has been aligned with racism. According to this racist ideology, non-white and non-Western peoples are the feminine Other to the masculine, white, West. This connection between the racialized Other, femininity, and the weird was highlighted by the 1936 production of *Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles, which cast these Sisters as “voodoo priestesses.”<sup>3</sup>

The weird can thus represent an encounter with the “unknown,” with its attendant anxiety, fear, or denial. The fact that the Weird Sisters were thought to be both supernatural and foretellers of the future highlights connections among mysticism, spirituality, science fiction, and technology. For instance, science fiction writer Philip K. Dick often suggested that epiphanies described as divine intervention or divine knowledge and conceptualized as religious or spiritual might actually be encounters with new or unknown technology—an encounter with what seems like the future. His character Horselover Fat in the novel *VALIS* experiences what he thinks is a revelation from God, but he later discovers that it is a pink laser beam originating from an alien satellite orbiting the earth.<sup>4</sup> A foretelling of the future may seem “weird,” supernatural, or odd, and it may describe technology so advanced that current modes of thought cannot comprehend it fully.

This sense of the weird as a combination of spirituality and technology is central to Afrofuturism, the idea that black culture offers new ways to use technology that predicts a better

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<sup>3</sup> Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson, eds., *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Valis*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

future for African Americans. Afrofuturism is thus critical of current uses of technology and narratives of the future that maintain white dominance. Musicologist J. Griffith Rollefson gets at this combination of spirit and machine by highlighting black culture's "Robot Voodoo Power" and "Myth-Science Approach," referring to music by rapper Keith Thornton (Kool Keith) and bandleader Sun Ra, respectively.<sup>5</sup> The early 19<sup>th</sup> century meaning of "weird" as "unearthly" would also apply to Sun Ra, who claimed to be from the planet Saturn and claimed that African Americans were not actually "citizens" of Earth.

"Weird" has been used to describe sound as well as people or phenomena; the OED devotes a separate subheading for the adjectival use of "weird" to describe sounds or voices as supernatural, mysterious, or uncanny. More significantly, the OED states that the first appearance of the noun "weird-o" in print was in the first edition of Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz* in 1955. The definition appears in Feather's "Glossary of Terms Used by Jazz Musicians": "weird-o. *n.* A weird person."<sup>6</sup> Feather's sparse definition provides no help with usage: whom would jazz musicians consider a "weird-o"—others, themselves, both? Is this designation derogatory or complimentary? The unhip are left to figure this out. This appearance in print is of course not the first time it was used in language; Feather's glossary is an ethnographic record of a subculture's lingo, a written record of an oral culture. More importantly, it is a performance of hipness. Feather's exhaustive list demonstrates to his (mostly) white readers that this white academic is no longhair but is hip to these black jazz musicians' jive, jack. His opening sentence itself performs hipness in a discussion of the very word "hip," which Feather informs his readers is the proper way a fan or musician pronounces "hip;" "if he

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<sup>5</sup> J. Griffith Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Feather, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1955), 347.

uses ‘hep,’ he is a ‘square.’”<sup>7</sup> Feather’s record of the use of “weird-o” among jazz musicians and their fans links the weird to racial appropriation, cultural borrowing, and the performative crossing of imaginary lines of race, which Chapter Three will explore at length.

By the 1960’s “weirdo” referred to members of the hippie counterculture, created in part from the earlier beatnik culture of white, hipster jazz fans. Because the counterculture embraced all that was ostensibly revolutionary and ant-establishment, they would have used “weird” as a compliment for something that was unsettling, new, or different, similar to “far out.” Today, many people, in keeping with the countercultural use, claim “weirdness” as a badge of honor and valorize “weird” artists as important. This romanticized notion of “weird,” as something inherently critical that is both strange and attractive, is common—for instance, in the unofficial slogan of the city of Austin, TX, “Keep Austin Weird.”

Ultimately, I’d like to maintain an ambivalent sense of the word “weird,” one that retains its critical possibilities but remains vigilant against the tendency to romanticize what the mainstream calls “weird.” The sense of the word that describes people who try to negotiate two worlds at once, who cross boundaries, and whose work might help predict better futures is helpful to my analysis of improvised performances that try to be oppositional but do not always succeed.

I want to attend to the ways dominant discourse labels something as “weird” in order to banish it as threatening to its dominance or to absorb it into itself by romanticizing its critical power. However, while analysis of this process is important to my work, this is not the way I use “weird” critically throughout this dissertation. Instead, I intend to discuss the weird as that which always complicates, problematizes, unsettles, or contradicts—or, in attempting to do so,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 345.

distances itself from the mainstream without forfeiting privilege. I use weird as an active term that always adds levels of complexity to any analysis. To look for the weird is to find critiques of the mainstream wherever they exist, to pay attention to what the mainstream dismisses as too strange or odd to be included. Indeed, to the oppressed, the dominant ideology of the oppressor seems weird; to think of the dominant ideology as weird is to question its supposedly natural or universal qualities. But this is only half of the potential of the weird, because looking for the weird means also looking for the ways that oppositional practices do not always resist, the ways they fail to resist, or how they might reinforce hierarchies in other ways. Like the Weird Sisters warning Macbeth, I want to warn those who study improvisation and performance of the possibility of this failure; approaching improvisation as either liberatory or hierarchical misses the possibility that a performance might be both.

Analysis of the weird is an attempt to account for the complexity of power relations that are part of every creative performance because performers also participate in those everyday power relations on and off stage. The multiform, overlapping, and changing nature of identities works its way into creative practices, despite our attempts as scholars, fans, and audience members to simplify it and sometimes against the intentions of performers themselves. It tries to unsettle analyses of culture that rest on simplistic notions of resistance or dominance, the want to see oppositional practices as only oppositional or dominance as all-pervasive or determinative.

Furthermore, looking for the weird also means being aware of the ways our own ideas as scholars double back on our own privilege, how our desire to find oppositional practices might also reinforce our romanticized notions of those practices and make us blind to the ways privilege informs our work. In this way, this dissertation is as much a warning for scholars about the weird as it is scholarship about the weird.

## Body

“Weird” also conjures up a ghostly apparition or a disembodied spirit. Too often in jazz studies (and other studies of music) the bodies of musicians appear ghostly or ephemeral; they don’t seem to exist in the “real” physical, social, and historical world of other human beings. Instead, they have transcended the material world through the pure genius of their improvisations; their disembodied spirits haunt the real world, leaving only ghostly traces of their bodily existence through recordings or transcribed solos. I will attempt to bring these bodies back to earth by focusing on bodies as objects of study—musical, sounding bodies; moving bodies; stationary bodies; gendered, raced, and sexualized bodies. Analyzing the body in this way means recognizing that the bodies of performers move within geographical, historical and social contexts, as well as recognizing that bodies make sound and speak.

Dance scholar Danielle Goldman’s work on dance improvisation informs the ways I analyze bodily movement in improvised performance. Her book *I Want to Be Ready: Dance Improvisation as a Practice of Freedom* has broad implications for the study of improvisation and embodiment. All improvisation has some boundaries, however narrow, broad, defined, or vague, she argues; all performers seek to navigate or stretch those boundaries in improvised performance. Furthermore, Goldman argues, skilled improvisation requires preparation, rehearsal, and training, so that the dancer (for instance) can be ready to move in a variety of ways in an ever-shifting landscape and in interaction with other performers. Improvisation for Goldman is not a way to gain freedom from structure or to break all boundaries; it is in fact the learned ability to recognize constraints and to explore the possibilities for movement within them. This sense of movement within boundaries is important to her conception of

improvisation as a social practice. Improvisation does not provide the practitioner total escape from the boundaries of society, history, style, or context; such an escape is actually impossible, despite the dominance of the discourse that says otherwise. Instead, skilled improvisation helps one see how to move within those bounds, even as the bounds shift and change in the moment. Thus Goldman describes improvisation as “live, urgent, playful, intelligent, spontaneous interactions with constraint.”<sup>8</sup>

To elaborate on the idea of constraints, Goldman also uses the term “tight spaces.” She borrows the term from Houston Baker, who uses it to explore African Americans’ struggle to participate in American modernity. From slave ships to the current prison system, these “tight spaces” have shaped black experience. Goldman deploys the term more broadly to analyze the socio-historical and material conditions of dancers and their movement, as well as the vocabularies of physical technique that dancers learn. These tight spaces, as norms of race, gender, and sexuality, limit and shape the possibilities of movement; they are also the form against which the improviser seeks to move in new and different ways. The term allows her to “analyze the ways in which one’s shifting social and historical positions in the world affect one’s mobility.”<sup>9</sup> This requires specific analysis of contexts because “some spaces are obviously ‘tighter’ than others.” These shifting positions mean that “people move differently in different contexts, and having to negotiate these various contexts at once can be extremely difficult or fraught.”<sup>10</sup> Tight spaces are awkward, constricting, and uncomfortable, but they often generate, necessitate, and inspire new movement.

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<sup>8</sup> Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Goldman further argues that expected behaviors in the street can be just as learned as dance styles, and both constitute tight spaces which can both constrain and offer the possibility of different movement. A well trained improviser knows how to move with and against those norms. As she states,

The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement often relate to aspects of one's identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality. But a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move."<sup>11</sup>

This instantaneous exploration of movement within boundaries, springing from a deep familiarity with one's body and surroundings, is what characterizes improvisation for Goldman. Thus, improvisation does not represent transcendence of time and space in order to achieve freedom, as it is often depicted. Instead Goldman argues that it is a spontaneous yet skillful practice that creates freedom of movement here and now, in the material, social, and aesthetic worlds in which bodies move, against the real norms that constrain those bodies. Goldman thus conceives of dance improvisation as a "practice of freedom," also borrowing from Foucault.

Conceiving of improvisation as a practice of freedom within constraints also means redefining "freedom" itself as a process instead of a goal. Goldman points to several misuses of "freedom," especially as it is associated with improvisation in dance and jazz. Often in dance scholarship, she notes, "discussions of improvisation and freedom . . . assume that freedom from dance conventions entails freedom from social conventions or political norms in general."<sup>12</sup> This problematic association occurs especially when dance improvisation is linked to freedom

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

struggles in the U.S. in the late twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> These misuses of the term elide the variety of sometimes contradictory or conflicting ideas about what exactly freedom would look like when it is supposedly achieved. She argues that “improvisation does not reflect or exemplify the understanding of freedom as a desired endpoint devoid of constraint.”<sup>14</sup> For Goldman, the most workable and flexible notion of freedom shows it to be an ongoing practice of negotiation, not a fantasized final destination. We should refer to “practices of freedom,” skilled, rehearsed, interactions with and testing of constraints at particular times and places.

Using Goldman’s conception of improvisation within constraints to analyze performance means investigating the specifics of each performance’s contexts—its aesthetic, geographical, historical, social, and ideological limits. It also requires close attention to the creative, spontaneous, practiced ways that performers become aware of those limits and then move within them. It turns the focus of cultural critique onto bodies and movement, which allows for analysis of the ways ideologies of race and gender affect bodies and their movement, as well as attention to the particular spaces through which bodies move, in relation to other bodies, at particular times. It allows for improvisation as an important factor in human’s capacity to figure out how to move; in other words, it is an analysis of the possibilities for agency within larger structures. While her book focuses mainly on dance, it has implications for the study of improvisation in music, theatre, and other arts, especially in multidisciplinary performances that combine several creative practices.

If the weird is elusive and problematic, then weird bodies are slippery; just when we think we have captured them, they slip out of our hands. Weird bodies move within tight spaces, and they can elude even the grasp of the scholar who tries to capture them in his totalizing grip.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

Weird bodies are neither inherently subversive nor inherently dominant; they slide through the gap between such binary terms. And as they slip and slide around dominant notions of what counts as music, they make a noise.

## Noise

I borrow my third conceptual term, “noise” from Jacques Attali’s book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, a work of post-Marxist analysis that examines the imbrication of changes in music with changes in social and economic structures throughout history. For Attali, history is the succession of codes that suppress and manage the “noise” of desire and the body; to look at all music as noise shows how it is subject to systems of domination. But music also can prophesy change because it “makes mutations audible.” Furthermore, “it obliges us to invent categories and new dynamics to regenerate social theory.”<sup>15</sup> For Attali, listening to music as noise can lead us to new ways of thinking about social practice, community, and history.

For Attali (writing in the late 1970’s), we currently live under the system of “repetition,” a time when the music industry controls what gets heard as “normal” or mainstream. Because the record industry owns the means of musical production, it has the ability to “monitor noises, to maintain them, and to control their repetition within a determined code . . . [this ownership] allows one to impose one’s own noise and to silence others.”<sup>16</sup> Under these conditions, new sounds are not often heard; when they are, they are not accepted as appropriate for the culture. Repetition is characterized by several factors: large, multinational corporations that produce music alongside of disposable products and other commodities like real estate and oil; the

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

creation of consumers through the “production of demand;” the ubiquity of mass media; and the stockpiling of goods.<sup>17</sup> Through these processes, repetition silences difference and produces sameness. Thus domination is maintained by only by economic or market institutions, but by educational, governmental, and other cultural systems working together to silence difference and produce sameness. Therefore, just as the same sounds get repeated, circulated, and recirculated in the age of repetition, so do the same historical narratives. Repetition makes difficult the production of both alternative sounds and alternative histories by overwhelming the field of struggle with its oppressive and limiting sonic and narrative sameness. At the same time, repetition’s strict definitions of acceptable sounds also produce the conditions for noise; in order to define what counts as “music,” institutions under repetition must also define its opposite—noise. Having been created and subsequently banished by repetition’s institutions, noise returns to critique repetition, creating a field of constant struggle.

Whether we are still in the era of repetition in 2013 is debatable. The Internet has allowed for new avenues of distribution and circulation of “noise,” but often to smaller audiences and resulting in less profit for artists. In addition, problems of access to internet technologies and acquiring the education to use them persist. Furthermore, the biggest, most popular websites are the ones with the most advertising money, and they still limit the sounds that get heard in order to attract the most amount of traffic for the least amount of content. While more “noise” is getting made and heard by more people, it can be argued that sameness still dominates, as seen for example on reality television shows that feature music and dance competition. One hears and sees plenty of repetition of the same sounds and movements on popular programs such as *The Voice* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. Many of the performers on these shows are indeed

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 103.

talented and have trained their bodies to skillfully express a range of emotion, but they do so within a fairly limited range of creative practices as defined by the show's judges and producers, all of whom are industry professionals. In the audition stages of these programs, audiences see some performers who have little professional training or whose work falls outside the narrow definitions of "music" on which these programs operate, but these performers very rarely advance to the final rounds of the competition. The winners of these competitions, selected by millions of fans watching them on television and on the Internet, win because their performances are, in Attalien terms, appropriate for the culture of repetition, not because they herald a new, freer era of noise.

For Attali, music that does get labeled as "noise" can herald the next era by challenging the distribution of power in its time and under its current economic system. For our own time, this appears as "the permanent affirmation of the right to be different . . . It is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one's own code and work."<sup>18</sup> Music under this emerging system would not be subject to the repetition of the market, gaining its importance as a consumer good; it would instead be the product of each individual's creativity and productive labor. Moreover, the dominant idea would be "the right to make the free and revocable choice to interlink with another's code;" this network of codes would in turn "compose one's life."<sup>19</sup> Thus the new system is called "composition."

Scholars who hear in music now that affirmation of difference as a challenge to social norms are inspired by Attali's vision to champion advanced, creative musical practices, especially improvised ones, and to demonstrate how they herald a better future. Indeed, many scholars who use Attali's work—especially those associated with the research project

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice at the University of Guelph—argue that what he describes as “composition” might best be labeled “improvisation,” because it champions interconnecting with others creatively and freely through the celebration of difference and noise.<sup>20</sup> Attali’s work (and some of the work based on it) has been criticized for its romanticizing of marginalized musics and groups, its imprecise or inaccurate musicological details, and its impractical utopian dreams.<sup>21</sup> I will address these debates more fully in Chapter Two, but I will say here that while the usefulness of Attali’s concept has its limits, it can work as a method for understanding the historical contexts in which music is made, past and present. I do find somewhat dramatic and simplistic his notion that history is an ongoing battle between the opposing forces of Silence and Noise, a struggle which Noise eventually wins at an undetermined time in the future. However, what I do find compelling is his emphasis on struggle itself as shaping and being shaped by sound. Examining struggles over what is considered “music” and what is labeled “noise”—as well as the social and historical stakes in that struggle—can lead to analysis of power that might be more complex and nuanced than Attali’s own.

## **Weird Bodily Noises**

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Ken Prouty, "The 'Finite' Art of Improvisation: Pedagogy and Power in Jazz Education," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique en Improvisation* 4, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/346/966>.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Alan Stanbridge, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value," *ibid.*, <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/361/960>.

Informing my conception of weird bodily noises is the notion that improvised performances are necessarily complex and not necessarily oppositional. Sherrie Tucker's comments on "women-in-jazz" capture what I mean by this formulation:

Even the most experimental varieties of jazz, while they may transform how we hear and think and play and conceive relationships, do so not by transcending culture and history, but by signifying within constellations of historically situated meaning. As such, jazz communities are not immune to reproducing hierarchical social meanings of their times and places through musical narratives, divisions of labor, and distribution of prestige, even as they may strive for the new.<sup>22</sup>

Following from Tucker's work, I believe it is crucial to explore both the ways improvisation "strives for the new" and "reproduces hierarchical social meanings." This is what an analysis of weird bodily noises attempts to do.

Listening for weird bodily noises valorizes awkwardness, paradox, conflict, incongruence, and inconsistency. It values these in creative practices because artists are also people who live in a complex world of conflicting power relations, intersecting lines of power, overlapping identities, and heterogeneous social groups. The creative practices I value are ones that do not seek to transcend these complexities, ignore them, or distill them into a neat, limiting binary, but instead allow them to exist simultaneously. I'm also interested in creative practices that try to distill or simplify what is complex and fail spectacularly, or fail in one instance and succeed in another. Thus looking for the weird means being specific, attending to the actual

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<sup>22</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "Bordering on Community: Improvising Women Improvising Women-in-Jazz," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 245.

historical contexts, social relations, political economy, physical landscape in which improvised performances happen.

Weird bodily noises foreground the interplay of agency and structure, taking both into account as occurring simultaneously, and often in the same body, the same movement, the same performance, the same space, or the same sound. Our experiences as individual subjects come up against the constraints of social structures every day. There is wiggle room in those tight spaces, and the tightness comes from somewhere specific. An analysis of weird bodily noises is interested in oppositional improvisation within those constraints, but it also demonstrates that improvisation is not necessarily oppositional, that it can reinforce structures and norms as much as it plays with them.

Furthermore, weird bodily noises can be funny, and laughter is a bodily noise. Humor is often seen as disruptive to “serious” art, and some forms of humor can critique power. A whole range of weird bodily noises—burps, sneezes, farts—remind us of bodily functions; bodies that create beautiful art also defecate, urinate, and copulate, like most other bodies. Jazz has a history of humor and weird bodily noises; one of the earliest jazz recordings, “Livery Stable Blues” by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, featured the horn players improvising animal sounds. Improvisation is itself playful, like an aural pun or joke, signifying on widely known melodies. Both performing and listening to improvisation can inspire the laughter of delight, reminding us that improvisation can be a pleasurable exchange among performers and between performers and audience. I will explore the intersection of humor, improvisation, and noise further in Chapter Two; Chapter Four takes up the overlap of improvisation, pleasure, and the body.

Analysis of weird bodily noises is inspired by moves in critical race theory and queer theory. Like these theoretical moves, listening for weird bodily noises assumes that identity

categories are unstable, multiform, and changing, and that they are performative: all gender and sexuality is ultimately queer and no racial category is essential to human existence. Despite the ungrounded nature of identity, categories of race and gender remain meaningful, as instruments of both community belong and oppression. Analyzing weird bodily noises highlights the strange ways these two senses of identity confront each other, as both liberatory and oppressive, especially when they confront each other in the same performance, the same body, or the same gesture or sound. While I look for the creative ways human beings improvise identity, I also warn that such improvisations may not destroy hierarchies and in fact sometimes reinforce them.

Weird bodily noises are thus improvised performances of race, gender, and jazz history. Critical race and gender scholars demonstrate the ways these notions of identity are performative, embodied, and changing, yet remain meaningful as both instruments of oppression and avenues for resistance. We all improvise on the repetitions of gender and racial norms, and that improvisation can both reproduce those norms and complicate or help dismantle them. Musicians, performers, and scholars similarly improvise jazz history when they signify on the repetition of dominant jazz discourse. They do so when they create new narratives of jazz history that are made up of new sounds, practices, and performers.

## **Methods**

I see my subject as complex and thus requiring an interdisciplinary approach to explore fully. My work employs a variety of methodologies, including ethnographic interviews and participant-observation, oral history, archival research, and analysis of embodiment in sound and movement. My archival work took place at the Marr Sound Archives, part of the Budde Special Collections at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Among numerous other Kansas City-

related materials, the archives hold soundboard recordings of the Kansas City Jazz Festival from 1965 to 1975. The fact that these materials have been preserved and digitized allowed me to hear some of the earliest avant-garde jazz performances in Kansas City in the context of a larger jazz festival. My interviews with musicians who participated in those and other early performances—especially with Arnold Young and Noah Young—helped fill in the details of those performances. Their telling of these events, discussed in Chapter One, are examples of musicians improvising jazz history, narrating themselves into the larger history of jazz that has largely left them out. Noah Young also generously provided me with digital scans of photographs and newspaper articles related to these early performances.

The performances I discuss here occurred between 2008 and 2013, and took place at nightclubs, small theatres, art galleries, and libraries all over Kansas City but concentrated in the Crossroads Arts District at 18<sup>th</sup> St. Interviews were held at a variety of coffee shops, bars, restaurants, and theatres in Kansas City and Lawrence, KS. I am interested to some extent in what these performances represent or how they appear to audiences, so paying attention to the details of sound, music, and staging from the audience was important. But I'm also interested in how the performers experience their performances, so discussing this experience with them was crucial. As with the oral histories, narrating their experiences for a researcher is a performance of its own; I am not so much interested in the "facts" of the performance as I am in how the performers see themselves and other performers. Both their performances and their answers to my questions about performance participate in their construction of public selves.

I don't intend this dissertation to be a definitive history of Kansas City avant-garde jazz; instead, I use Kansas City as a site to explore the larger issues of improvisation, identity, historical narrative, and power. Avant-garde jazz gets mostly left out of the dominant jazz

discourse, which portrays it as “destroying” essential jazz practices, complicating or bringing chaos to jazz’s otherwise neat story of organic progress, killing jazz, or ending jazz history. Even when jazz scholarship addresses the avant-garde as a legitimate subject of study, much of it focuses on New York as the or a center of avant-garde jazz, primarily because so many of these musicians lived and played there at one time or another.<sup>23</sup> George Lewis’s history of the AACM remedies that spatial narrowness by focusing on the development of that organization in Chicago.<sup>24</sup> Ben Looker’s history of BAG in St. Louis is another important text in this regard, but more work on St. Louis avant-garde after the departure of most of BAG (to Chicago or New York) could be done.<sup>25</sup> Much like Kansas City, New Orleans’ place in jazz history is often relegated to its past as the “birthplace of jazz;” its own vibrant avant-garde jazz output since the 1960’s is fertile ground for a similar study.

What I mean to argue here is that the struggles over identity, space, and the meanings of “jazz” I discuss here are not limited to Kansas City but are part of a global circulation of sounds, discourses, and people. In specific locales, those flows intersect with the local problems, issues, and histories (that are themselves parts of flows and networks) and create specific historical and geographical problems that continue to be struggled over. Weird bodily noises can be heard everywhere, but they do not all sound the same.

I initially chose Kansas City as a site for my study of avant-garde jazz in part because of its close proximity to my home in Lawrence, KS. I soon found the performances of Southerland

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<sup>23</sup> Some work on European avant-garde jazz also complicates this picture. See Mike Heffley, *Northern Sun, Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005); Kevin Whitehead, *New Dutch Swing*, (New York: Billboard Books, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The A.A.C.M. And American Experimental Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Looker, *Point from Which Creation Begins: The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis*, (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004).

and other groups as compelling as any well-known avant-garde jazz or performance art, so I chose to focus my entire dissertation on Kansas City performers, to emphasize the fact that they have as much to offer analytically as those better-known performers. Because the scene in Kansas City is so small, I probably gained access more easily to these performers and spent more time with them than I likely would have if I were interviewing musicians based in New York or Chicago who, though hardly canonical, have attained a kind of celebrity status among free jazz fans.

### **Chapter Summaries**

Chapter One, “Weird Bodily History,” establishes historical precedent for avant-garde jazz in Kansas City by examining performances and performers in the 1960’s, showing how local musicians in the scene both complicated and reproduced dominant historical narratives about one of the “cradles of jazz.” These white, male musicians’ relationship to the jazz canon is complex: it supports them, their perspectives, and their privilege, but it also leaves their individual activity out of its larger narratives. In conceptualizing their stories as weird bodily histories, I seek to highlight the contradictions in this positioning, listening for the ways these musicians’ oral histories belie their privilege even as they demonstrate their support of and solidarity with minorities in the Kansas City jazz scene.

Chapter Two, “Bodily Noises: Improvisation and the Sound of Surprise,” analyzes two performances in Kansas City from 2012 that use humor and the bodily noise of laughter to point out and critique social inequities while also reproducing social hierarchies. Performances that feature improvised music and movement, such as the Kansas City’s underground Mardi Gras parade, question traditional definitions of jazz performance practices and official uses of public

space through the potentially subversive use of humor, “carnavalesque” improvisation, dance, and visual art. This chapter examines the possibilities and limits of Jacques Attali’s concept of “noise” as music that heralds a new and better future. Linking Attali’s “noise” with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnavalesque” helps to explore potentially transformative, embodied and improvised performances through humor and the transformation of space. But both thinkers’ concepts are ultimately inadequate to explain the weird bodily noises of Kansas City avant-garde jazz—the simultaneous workings of dominant and subordinate impulses that pervade contemporary improvised performances.

Chapter Three, “Weird Noises: Avant-Garde Jazz and the ‘Cross-Racial Imagination,’” explores the complex questions of appropriation, cultural borrowing, and influence that arise when three white musicians in Kansas City cross imaginary racial lines to perform avant-garde music. My concept of the “cross-racial imaginary” examines the ways that white musicians offer legitimate critiques of dominant racial hierarchies while sometimes simultaneously reproducing those hierarchies. These musicians cite as an influence the black composer, bandleader, and philosopher Sun Ra; such professed allegiance to black avant-gardism presents opportunities to explore the often problematic ways white musicians cross imaginary racial lines to borrow or appropriate black culture in order to rebel against the white mainstream. The “weird noises” these avant-garde musicians make, in their sonic practices and in their personal narratives, offer sites to explore these issues of improvisation and race.

Chapter Four, “Weird Bodies: Movement, Constraint, and Gender,” looks closely at some of the performance practices of Kansas City composer, saxophonist and sculptor Mark Southerland, whose “wearable horn sculptures” both reinforce and complicate normative gender roles. Following from Danielle Goldman’s work on improvised dance, I argue in this chapter that

the women who wear Southerland's horn sculptures as he "plays" them are physically, socially, and metaphorically constrained, but they discover ways to move within those constraints. The "weird bodies" formed by the combination of a male instrumentalist, a female dancer, and a horn sculpture may represent domination of women, but the improvisers' discussion of their own experiences as intimate and meaningful offer a more complex look at the role improvisation plays in gender relations and power.

CHAPTER I:  
WEIRD BODILY HISTORY

In 1977, Jacques Attali, an economist and adviser to French president François Mitterrand, wrote *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, a work of post-Marxist analysis that examined the imbrication of changes in music with changes in social and economic structures throughout history. Attali looked at the ways some musical practices got labeled as “noise” at every major stage in Western history, showing how those sounds were subject to systems of domination already in place. He also argued that “noise” can prophesy musical—and by extension, socioeconomic—change because it “makes mutations audible;”<sup>1</sup> listening to music as noise can lead us to new ways of thinking about social practice and community in the past and in the present. Inspired by free jazz musicians operating in New York and Chicago, Attali listened for how these new musical practices, often called “noise” by detractors, might “sound out” a new and better future, heralding a world that was yet to come. The same year that *Noise* was originally published, Kansas City drummer Arnold Young, also inspired by free jazz musicians in the New York jazz loft scene, was organizing a series of musical gatherings with a broad musical vision. On a weekly basis, Young invited his neighbors and fellow musicians who played a range of musical styles—jazz, free improvisation, rock, blues, country, R&B, funk, among others—to attend and play at a series of public, open jam sessions at his home. He called the series “Friends and Neighbors,” after the album Ornette Coleman recorded in his own loft in New York in 1970.

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<sup>1</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 4.

In this chapter, I listen for “audible mutations” in Kansas City jazz since the 1960’s, documenting some music that might have been called “noise” as well as the people who made those sounds. Attali’s belief in the potential of new sounds is sometimes criticized as being idealistic; the examples I present in this chapter both support and refute his hopes for noise in history. Musicians like Young in Kansas City during the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s, inspired by avant-garde musicians gaining wider exposure all over the world, sought out new improvised practices and attempted to build new social communities around those improvised practices. They were a small cohort, their activities barely documented by anyone but themselves, and they did not largely succeed in creating a sizable, sustainable avant-garde jazz community in Kansas City. Some of them remain in the city and occasionally play free improvised music today, due largely to their own persistence, and the support of a younger, more musically ecumenical generation of jazz musicians in Kansas City. Still, the narrative of jazz history in Kansas City that gets repeated and circulated the most leaves out these people and their musical practices, dismissing them as inconsequential “noise” because they do not fit the standard story of progress in jazz styles. This chapter in part seeks to “bring the noise” to that Kansas City jazz history, allowing some musicians who made avant-garde music to speak. As with all discussions of difference, genre, and ownership in jazz, these stories develop along racial lines; this chapter will also examine some of the complex racial relationships that shaped and were shaped by avant-garde jazz in Kansas City.

### **Introduction: Doing “Weird Bodily History”**

What does it mean to do “weird bodily history”? First I’ll explain what I mean by “history” and how I use it in this chapter, then what makes those historical methods “weird” and

“bodily.” This chapter explores history in three interrelated ways—as the presentation of events from the past, as practices of historiography, and as oral history. This chapter is interested in the ways that these three conceptions can be both dominant and subversive, often at once. First and most simply, I present in this chapter information about events in the past, culled from historical and personal archives and interviews—specifically, the people, places, and sounds of avant-garde jazz in Kansas City from the 1960’s to the 1990’s. This is by no means a complete history of this era or scene; I represent only a handful of musicians, performances, and spaces in this chapter, and more work remains to be done. My focus on Kansas City avant-garde, a subject that has not been written about in jazz history as of this writing, works against larger, dominant jazz narratives that mention Kansas City only in reference to its prominence in the 1920’s and 1930’s as a hotbed for big band music. As journalist Benjamin Franklin, V, has pointed out, local jazz histories necessarily critique larger narratives (ones that claim universality) simply by pointing out that those larger narratives leave out thousands of performers who have not been recorded, who performed only regionally or locally, or who sometimes played music that wasn’t strictly defined as “jazz.”<sup>2</sup>

For Franklin, simply documenting these local histories serves as sufficient critique of the dominant history. But this chapter moves beyond merely presenting these local histories and toward a more intentional critical intervention into the telling of jazz history. As such, this chapter is a critique of dominant jazz historiography in wide circulation in film, TV, and books—historiography that celebrates “great masters” in jazz, its periodized history, and a limited range of musical practices. Such a critical move assumes that jazz historiography is

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Franklin, V, "The Problem of Local Jazz History: The Example of South Carolina," in *Jazz in Mind: Essays on the History and Meanings of Jazz*, ed. Reginald T. Buckner and Steven T. Weiland (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

constructed, positioned, and always involved in power relations—rather than natural a natural, neutral, or disinterested retelling of “what happened in the past.”

Dominant jazz historiography is the product of our time, which Attali refers to as the era of “repetition.” His analysis of the political economy of music, especially of the ideologies, institutions, and systems that produce and police musical boundaries, is also a critique of the dominant historiography of music, that is, the ways that hegemonic historical practices silence historical actors and the “noise” they make. For Attali, the political economy of music in the era of repetition is dominated by a pervasive and totalizing music industry that controls what gets heard as “normal” or mainstream. Because the record industry owns the means of musical production, it has the ability to “monitor noises, to maintain them, and to control their repetition within a determined code. . . [this ownership] allows one to impose one’s own noise and to silence others.”<sup>3</sup> Under these conditions, new sounds are not often heard; when they are, they are not accepted as appropriate for the culture (i.e., marketable). Repetition is characterized by several factors: large, multinational corporations that produce music alongside of disposable products and other commodities like real estate and oil; the creation of consumers through the “production of demand;” the ubiquity of mass media; and the stockpiling of goods.<sup>4</sup> Through these processes, repetition silences difference and produces sameness. Just as the same sounds get repeated and circulated and recirculated in the age of repetition, so do the same historical narratives. Repetition makes difficult the production of both alternative sounds and alternative histories (not to mention alternative sounds *as* alternative histories) by overwhelming the field of struggle with its oppressive and limiting sonic and narrative sameness.

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<sup>3</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

To describe this pervasive dominance, the members of the Popular Memory Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (PMG) use the term “dominant memory,” which “refers to the power and pervasiveness of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions, and the part they play winning consent and building alliances in the processes of formal politics.”<sup>5</sup> According to the PMG, the field in which dominant memory proliferates is a field of struggle, because conceptions of the past are often at odds with one another. “Certain representations achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly,” they explain; “others are marginalized or excluded or reworked.”<sup>6</sup> The representations that gain the most traction or get circulated through the most and widest channels, though, are not necessarily the “truest” ones: “dominant representations may be those that are most ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth.”<sup>7</sup> Such “flattened stereotypes” proliferate in jazz histories like Ken Burns’ documentary film *Jazz*, so full as it is of heroic individual members of minority groups who magically “overcome hardships” like historical racial oppression; mad geniuses who create music in a vacuum and all alone; and benevolent white men who ostensibly transcend social realities of race and gender to create “art.”

Because this dominant narrative exists in a field of struggle, it is possible to listen for the voices that “sound out” against it. For Attali, these alternative sounds can herald the next era by challenging the distribution of power in its time and under its current economic system. For our own time, this appears as “the permanent affirmation of the right to be different. . . It is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one’s own code and work.”<sup>8</sup> Music

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<sup>5</sup> Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 132.

under this emerging system would not be subject to the repetition of the market, gaining its importance as a consumer good; it would instead be the product of each individual's creativity and productive labor.

For the PMG, one way to intervene on the pervasive dominant history is through oral history work. Oral historians find and circulate "popular memory," a "common sense of the past" that exists in personal remembrances, letters, photographs, and other personal sources. More importantly, these two senses of history are not separate, but inform each other. The study of popular memory thus necessitates the study of dominant memory, because "private memories cannot, in concrete studies, be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourses."<sup>9</sup> Thus the stories jazz musicians tell about their past that are gathered in oral histories are a mixture of their private memories and the dominant stereotypes and stories in circulation.

Oral histories have long been used in jazz historiography, and not necessarily in subversive ways. Sherrie Tucker points out how jazz historian Stanley Dance's presentation of oral histories in *The World of Swing* downplays the roles of women musicians in the swing era, even while the male musicians he interviewed mentioned their significance. Such jazz histories tend to use oral interviews as "authenticating sound bites" to amplify the historian's own point of view. "If, however," Tucker argues, "we think of oral histories as events in themselves rather than as clear channels to the 'true story,' then we can begin to see how they relate to specific contexts."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory," 46.

<sup>10</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 20.

Listening to oral histories as “events, in themselves” reveal them to be closely tied up in identity construction. Oral histories are, after all, personal narratives, stories that produce subjectivities and contribute to the construction of multi-faceted identities, a construction which takes place in public. Oral historian Alistair Thomson, riffing on the various meanings of the word “composure,” explains how the semi-private act of narratively constructing a self intersects with public history:

In one sense we ‘compose’ or construct memories using the public language and meanings of our culture. In another sense we ‘compose’ memories which help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives, which gives us a feeling of composure . . . We seek composure, an alignment of our past, present and future lives.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the notion that oral history relies on participants who construct memories would seem to discount those participants as credible sources of information about the past. However, Thomson, argues, oral historians are also interested in “the ways in which the past is resonant in our lives today,” and, therefore, “oral testimony is essential evidence for analysis of the interactions between past and present, and between memory and mythology.”<sup>12</sup> While oral histories might provide information about the past, they are also evidence of the ubiquity of the “flattened stereotypes” and “myths” that circulate in the larger culture, as well as of the myriad ways individual actors work against and with those myths.

Despite the noise of avant-garde sounds and alternative histories, the wash of sound in the era of repetition still dominates. It can mix with the noise of alternative musical practices, making some musical practices both dominant and subordinate or subversive at once or

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<sup>11</sup> Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Theory into Practice in Australia," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 245.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

dominant and then subordinate—that is, “weird.” Weird bodily history thus engages three senses of “history”—events in the past that are recounted in the present; the constructed nature of historiography; and narratives of past events that attempt to position the teller or enter into struggles for meaning. While interweaving these three related conceptions of history, weird bodily history also examines bodies in history—sounding bodies; raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies; expressive bodies; “authentic” bodies; moving bodies and bodies “in place”; bodies disciplined by conventions of historical narrative and musical genre; bodies that figure out how to move within constraints. These historical bodies are weird because they are complex—they move against constraints, subvert dominant histories, land on the wrong note, prophesy the future, they are mutations, but they also often reinforce the dominant history, support constraints or make them more clear or obvious, land on the predictably “right” notes, drown out noise, and dismiss mutations as irrelevant. They often do these simultaneously. This chapter thus brings attention to bodies that move and sound and make music, and it also notes bodily movement in interviews to animate the musicians’ spoken words.

### **“Abolish the Star System”: Revising Kansas City Jazz History**

In 1923, Bennie Moten, an African American born in Kansas City, made his first recordings for the Okeh record label while on a brief trip to Chicago; these sides, along with several by Kansas City vocalists Ada Brown and Mary Bradford, are cited as the first recordings of the “Kanas City style.”<sup>13</sup> That same year, at the height of the Great Migration of African Americans north, Kansas City passed a zoning ordinance legalizing the creation and maintenance of racialized neighborhoods, five years after the Supreme Court had declared such practices

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop--a History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

unenforceable.<sup>14</sup> Kansas City's black downtown was already thriving by this time, with its borders consisting roughly of 12<sup>th</sup> St. to the north, 25<sup>th</sup> St. to the south, the Paseo to the west, and Woodland St. to the east.<sup>15</sup> "Boss Tom" Pendergast was ruling the city by 1925, facilitating the growth of "vice districts" in the 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine St. area, which featured gambling, prostitution, and dozens of nightclubs hosting local and touring musicians. By 1940, Charlie Parker was making his first recordings with Jay McShann, and Count Basie had left Kansas City for New York. The Citizens Reform Party won city elections that year, and Tom Pendergast was in jail for tax evasion and no longer influential. In that same year, as black neighborhoods, ignored by city maintenance and building officials, began to fall apart, and as blacks tried to move out, white residents of predominantly white neighborhoods began a campaign of violence and threats to keep blacks out that lasted through the decade.<sup>16</sup> In between 1923 and 1940, Kansas City jazz grew and flourished, developing from an ostensibly distinct regional sound to a fully formed "period" or "major contribution" to the supposedly organic growth of jazz, as the dominant jazz histories have it. Discrimination against African Americans in Kansas City continued, as did the formation of segregated neighborhoods that were soon neglected by the city. Black jazz musicians, their families, friends, and fellow performers, were also citizens of Kansas City who benefitted in some ways from Pendergast's political thuggery; at the same time, they were also defined and limited by its racist foundations, as well as by more widespread and systemic racist practices in real estate, banking, zoning, and education. The concurrence of the flourishing of jazz in Kansas City with the heightening of racism in the city is not a coincidence; rather, they

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2000*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Jason M. Woods, "A Historical Georaphy of Kansas City's Jazz District" (University of Kansas, 2006), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 66.

are two intertwined aspects of history that are ignored by the dominant narrative of jazz's development.

This dominant narrative of jazz, its founding myth, is a simplistic timeline mapped onto a simplistic geography. Its primary geographical myth is that it was born in New Orleans and travelled up the Mississippi River to Chicago, and then on to New York. The problem with this story is that it is topographically impossible; Chicago is not on the Mississippi River. And, like all simplistic historical narratives, it leaves a lot out. It excludes cities actually on the Mississippi that are important to jazz, such as St. Louis, MO; Davenport and Dubuque, Iowa; and Minneapolis. And it leaves out cities not situated along the Mississippi, which have importance, such as Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Birmingham. But, a progression in time matches this progression in space, equally problematic, with the birth of jazz in New Orleans in the late 1890's, Chicago in the 1910's, and New York in the 1920's, where New York has remained as the center for innovation in jazz. This timeline ignores the fact that music and musicians travelled in different ways throughout the twentieth century; musicians especially by train, allowing them to travel to Kansas City, Los Angeles, and smaller towns in the southwest and southeast and north east and rust belt. And radio waves disseminated music throughout major populated and rural areas of the US in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The simplicity of this myth allows it to be repeated over and over and to be easily circulated, geographical and historical inaccuracies in tact. But more compelling is the metaphor of a river for the supposed organic development of jazz—always moving forward, always changing, being fed by various other bodies and feeding others, but somehow remaining the same substance throughout those changes. Even if a city like Kansas City is not on the actual Mississippi River, it is still seen in this myth as a small tributary emptying into the flow of the

primary source (literally, the main stream) of jazz. It contributed and perhaps “changed forever” the sound of jazz, the flow of the river. The myth also has its heroes—nearly all male, and, unlike Chicago’s or Los Angeles’ mythology, mostly African American. And all of them are presented to us as mythic individualists, geniuses who create music alone out of their own heads and “advance the music” as virtuosic soloists and sometimes as composers. Of course this pantheon leaves out women, other minorities, and the millions of performers, visual artists, writers, and producers, who did not play instruments or sing who also made jazz. As with mythic time and space, the metaphor of the river makes for an easily packaged story. But it is far from the truth, and it may in fact encourage and support simplistic thinking about jazz as a primarily human endeavor. This entire myth is based on the idea that jazz is an organic whole that changes itself and grows from internal processes, wholly separate, usually, from outside change. The problem with this conception at its core is that humans are music makers, not the other way around. While music does change, it changes because the people who make it change, and their social relations change over time, not because jazz “music itself” works by some interior impenetrable logic. This myth also leaves the tributaries and cities in the dust historically. Cities like New Orleans and Chicago and Kansas City, while important to the music’s past, are no longer thought of as important to its present or future according to this narrative. Jazz supposedly outgrew the “cradles” of New Orleans, Chicago, and Kansas City, and these places are important today only to the extent that they tell us about their past contributions. Parents keep a cradle because it reminds them of their child as a baby in the past, not because the child still uses it.

Discussions of Kansas City in the dominant histories of jazz are usually limited to its role in jazz’s development in the 1920’s and 1930’s and establish a particular Kansas City jazz style that was characteristic of that period. Those histories inevitably mention Count Basie as a central

figure. However, they often note that Basie was born in Red Bank, NJ, and didn't begin to make his contribution to jazz until he was "stranded" in Kansas City without a band. This wording occurs in most accounts of Basie's early career, suggesting that Kansas City was not an intentional destination but a place where one is forced to stay against one's will. It is a temporary stop on the road to success for Basie, as it is a step toward the fruition of modern jazz in the larger histories. What we learn along the way are the "elements" of the Kansas City style, described as, for instance: "four-to-the-bar rhythm, the use of head arrangements, and tight ensemble work in support of the soloists."<sup>17</sup> This description is typical of most overall jazz history books.<sup>18</sup> It also appears in probably the most well known of jazz histories, Ken Burns' documentary film, *Jazz*.<sup>19</sup> I don't mean to argue here that all jazz histories must treat Kansas City in its fullness, but I merely point out how pervasive the progressive narrative of jazz history remains, even in recent iterations of it such as Giddins and DeVeaux's book.

Even works that focus on Kansas City jazz in attempts to provide more detail sometimes take an outsider's perspective. Ross Russell, in his 1971 book *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, muses: "Just how many readers have been to Kansas City? Through KC perhaps, but have they stopped and lingered there to discover what is unique about the Midwestern metropolis situated at the confluence of the Kaw and Missouri rivers? The fact is that nobody knows very much about Kansas City even today."<sup>20</sup> Of course, Kansas Citians know a lot about Kansas City, as does anyone else who's lived in the city or nearby, and the musicians who passed through it,

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<sup>17</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009); Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1997); Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History & Analysis*, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Burns, *Jazz*.

<sup>20</sup> Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 3.

made homes there, or otherwise are connected to it know a good bit about its history and its present. A recent addition to the literature, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History*, by Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, has remedied this problem somewhat, focusing on the rich history of its musicians.

Since most timelines of Kansas City jazz stop with the birth of bebop, Kansas City's influence on music is said to have waned by 1945; the music world had supposedly moved on and Kansas City no longer "contributed" to the music. Indeed, most figures from Kansas City or who spent time in Kansas City during the 1920's and 1930's, moved on to become "bigger stars" in jazz or major figures in its history. In this way of telling jazz history, Kansas City recedes in the past, left behind by its few exceptional stars who inevitably must leave the Midwest to hone their skills in competition with the better players in New York. This was true for musicians like Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker, and for Bob Brookmeyer, Melba Liston, and Pat Metheny. It was also true of lesser known avant-garde jazz musicians in Kansas City like Richard Youngstein and Travis Jenkins. But of course, many musicians stayed in Kansas City or left and returned later, making excellent music there; most of them are not included in the broad histories of jazz, let alone as "stars" of the music. So works like Driggs and Haddix's that provide greater detail about Kansas City jazz history go a long way toward broadening the small pantheon of "great men" of jazz, but the fact that most of them do not mention music made in the city after the 1950's means that they fall back on the notion that only Kansas City's past is important to jazz, while ignoring its present or even its more recent past.

As an alternative to the "great men" narrative of jazz, George Lipsitz has proposed that we tell the "history of jazz as creative act rather than created product [that] can be represented in

an infinitely diverse and plural number of equally true narratives.”<sup>21</sup> This may mean that those who study jazz history, as Sherrie Tucker has argued, are actually studying “subjects in the process of becoming.”<sup>22</sup> This more expansive and inclusive narrative of jazz history—found in the work of Lipsitz, Tucker, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild, for example—examines music as a human, social practice, and explicitly or implicitly critiques the idea of jazz “stars.” In the words of Kansas City drummer Arny Young, “I believe that stars are gaseous bodies burning in space. Musicians are not stars. Musicians are people. I say abolish the star system.”<sup>23</sup>

The interviews I present below demonstrate some of Young’s iconoclastic attitude toward traditional jazz history and its “star system,” even as they show deep knowledge and reverence for it. The participants in this chapter construct their present selves through particular narrations of the past. Their stories show them to be both part of the mythology of jazz in Kansas City and separate from it; as privileged white hipster insiders and rebellious experimental outcasts; as skilled, experienced, virtuosic musical polymaths and enthusiastic yet naïve young people. The fact that their stories mix public mythology with private narratives means that they construct identities that are complex and sometimes contradictory, aware of privilege, especially when it comes to race, but sometimes naïve to its effects on them and their musical opportunities. The oral histories I present here are thus both alternative and dominant at once; they are “weird histories.” While they try for the subversive and alternative ways of making music today and the hopeful change for tomorrow, they also fall back on the mundane, the privileged, the dominant.

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<sup>21</sup> George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 104.

<sup>22</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The 'Subjectless Subject' of New Jazz Studies," *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* 2(2005): 35.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight Frizzell, "The Unra Blindfold Test," *The Penny Pitch*, November 1980, 9.

Several themes emerge in these interviews—issues of musical genre, negative reactions to avant-garde jazz, and musical resistance. All of the musicians I spoke with were concerned to some extent with genre categories, especially with the difficulty of labeling the music they and others played. The music I call “avant-garde jazz” they also refer to as “out,” “free,” or simply “avant.” Some of them express difficulty with even referring to their music as “jazz” when asked to do so. They seem keenly aware of the pitfalls and advantages of labeling their music, especially if the music is non-mainstream. Referring to their music as “avant-garde” risks alienation from mainstream audiences and musicians, of becoming “weird” or simply pretentious. But accepting this moniker also comes with its own community; the musicians here certainly express a sense of camaraderie with other “weird” musicians in Kansas City. Apart from the dangers of calling oneself “weird,” these musicians also tell stories of being mistreated for their “weird” musical practices by club-owners, teachers, and fellow musicians, especially when they flouted musical boundaries in performance. They describe this disciplining, in a Foucaultian sense, as a disciplining of the body, setting limitations on bodily movement. The demands by other musicians for a regular drum pattern or walking bass line limits the movement of the performers’ musical bodies; in those disciplining moments, it is as if the “myths” of Kansas City jazz historiography are brought to bear on their bodies, insisting on a limited set of musical practices, such as 4/4 swing. Despite this poor treatment, the participants I spoke with describe themselves often as continuing their “out” practices; they narrate themselves as defiant and rebellious in the face of restrictive ideas about just what constitutes “proper” jazz performance.

### **“Taking it out”: Early Avant-garde Jazz in Kansas City**

One of the first public, documented performances of avant-garde jazz in Kansas City was by a group called The Tajjasa Ensemble, consisting of pianist Manford Eaton, bassist Richard Youngstein (now known as Noah Young) and drummer Arnold Young.<sup>24</sup> The concert took place on Tuesday, March 9, 1965, at noon in the Stover Auditorium of the conservatory at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). According to Youngstein and Young, this was the first performance of its kind in Kansas City of almost entirely free, collective improvisation. But this performance didn't come from nowhere; as this chapter demonstrates, there is a history of avant-garde music jazz in Kansas City, however short or spotty it may be, whether or not those events, people, places, and sounds are lost to the past.

Arnold "Arny" Young was born in 1945 and grew up in Paola, KS, a small town about 45 miles south of Kansas City, MO, and a few miles west of the state line. Young demonstrated facility in jazz drumming early and was in demand in his small town, playing in the high school jazz band when he was in just seventh grade. Even this early in his life as a musician, Young was aware of the many different kinds of drumming and the possibilities open to him to identify as a drummer. He remembers liking Count Basie as a child and wanting to be "one of those flashy drummers [makes fast percussive sound with tongue and shakes hands quickly as if playing imaginary cymbals or drums] that do all that stuff," but in retrospect he realized "I don't fit that at all." When he heard modern jazz made in the 1940's and 1950's, "I couldn't make heads or tails of it at first," but his high school band teacher helped him by introducing him to Miles

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<sup>24</sup> I use "Richard Youngstein" rather than "Noah Young" throughout this dissertation to distinguish between him and Arnold Young more clearly when I use only surnames as a shorthand. Youngstein changed his name to Noah Young in the mid-1970's and continued to play bass professionally and semi-professionally under that name. He wishes it to be known that both names belong to the same individual.

Davis and the Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet.<sup>25</sup> He attended a jazz clinic organized by composer, bandleader, and educator Stan Kenton while in high school, where he learned from modern drummer Louis Hayes. Even if he admits to not understanding the modern rhythms of bebop and postbop at first, Young also says that “even in high school, I had this idea—why can’t I play out of time?” Young was questioning the basic assumptions of the music around him at the time—that the drummer must play a steady, consistent pulse throughout a performance. When he asked an older, more experienced drummer from a nearby town this question, he did not get a satisfying answer: “He just said, ‘You can’t do that.’”<sup>26</sup> Young’s phrase about time resonates with notions of history and musical practices that I take up through out this chapter. He wants to play “out of time,” that is, to depart from the steady, rhythmic patterns expected of jazz drummers in mainstream jazz. Dominant jazz historiography often includes steady 4/4 swing in its short list of jazz’s ostensibly essential elements; music without a swing feel (however loosely defined) simply couldn’t be jazz, according to this view. Thus Young’s wish to play “out of time” is also a wish to escape history, that is, dominant jazz historiography.

After confronting these early roadblocks to his musical questioning, Young found more empathetic musicians and teachers when he started school at the UMKC conservatory in 1964. He was encouraged to enroll by his friend Charles Gray, a fellow drummer and UMKC student.<sup>27</sup> Moving to Kansas City to begin school, he found avant-garde jazz records by Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane while shopping at Jenkins Music, a regional instrument and record shop with a large store at 1219 Walnut St. downtown. (Young and Youngstein’s relationship began at this store, as did the relationship of two other Kansas City jazz musicians, Carleton Coon and Joe

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<sup>25</sup> Roger Atkinson, "Arnold Young: 'It's a Life-Long Learning Process'," *JAM: Jazz Ambassadors Magazine*, February/March 2009, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Arnold Young. Interview with author. April 30, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Atkinson, "Learning Process."

Sanders, 50 years before.) As Young recalls, “the first time I ever heard Ornette Coleman I liked it right away.” But he had a harder time with John Coltrane’s later avant-garde work: “When I heard Trane I hated it, I had to listen to it over and over. I would go into the conservatory of music library—they had turntables, and I’d put on headphones, and I’d put my trench coat over my head [laughs and mimics this movement with his arms] and just listen to Coltrane over and over and finally I went, ‘I get it, I finally get it!’”<sup>28</sup> He says that many people were turned off by the aggressive sounds of the New Thing in those days, especially the high volumes and extended saxophone techniques of musicians like Coltrane and Archie Shepp. He offers another way to listen to these “intense” sounds, however: “Many people who give it one listening think it’s hostile because of their intensity level. They automatically interpret intensity as hostility. Intensity can be intensity of joy or anything, right?”<sup>29</sup> The “it” he got under the trench coat in the library was this broader understanding of musical and emotional intensity that would help him develop his avant-garde playing in the years to come.

The UMKC conservatory was important in this early Kansas City avant-garde jazz scene, because it is where Young would meet the other two members of the future Tajmas Ensemble, Richard Youngstein and Manford Eaton. Richard Youngstein was born in New York in 1944 and was classically trained in piano, showing musical aptitude at an early age. As he developed his skills, he felt tremendous pressure from his family to be a successful pianist and to perform for the family constantly. This pressure led him to give up playing seriously in his teens, after refusing his father’s request to perform for the many guests at Youngstein’s bar mitzvah. Despite this pressure, Youngstein’s father also introduced him to a treasure trove of music. He worked for United Artists and would bring home records that Youngstein would devour as a child and

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<sup>28</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Frizzell, "Unra."

high school student, everything from Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee to Charles Mingus and Max Roach. Then, he remembers “my father one day brought home a record from a label I’d never heard of called Transition. It was a black label and the front of the album was like very very abstract. And it was called—I’d never heard of the dude before—Cecil Taylor, Jazz Advance. And I was like Cecil Taylor, who the heck is this? I put that on and I went nuts.” Much like Young, Youngstein’s reaction to first hearing avant-garde jazz of the 1960’s was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. He also remembers hearing avant-garde classical music from that era, such as “the John Cage 20<sup>th</sup> retrospective live at Town Hall, David Tudor, and you know all the hits. John Cage’s Hit Parade! [laughs].” On this Cage recording, Youngstein recalled hearing the audience booing a performance of one of Cage’s pieces, realizing for the first time that such hostility toward avant-garde music was possible; the fact that the booing was recorded on a Cage album also might have taught Youngstein that it is possible to succeed in avant-garde music despite the hostility. He returned to music performance in high school when he picked up the bass and, with only six months of formal training, learned enough to be admitted to the UMKC conservatory in 1962. By the time of his acceptance, Youngstein said he was ready to leave his home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and strike out on his own.<sup>30</sup>

While in Kansas City, Youngstein continued to listen to jazz and collect records, but because there was no radio station that played avant-garde jazz, he had a difficult time hearing this new music. As he remembers:

I forget where I heard it from, maybe it was some of my friends back in New York. [They said], ‘Man you gotta here this music it’s out there, it’s new stuff, and you know, it has time but sometimes there’s no time or people go out or whatever.’ And then of course in

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Youngstein. Interview with author. May 22, 2012. Telephone.

New York they had some of the other things on Savoy like Archie Shepp and Bill Dixon in the septet and Milford Graves and oh ESP label. And uh I had heard none of it.<sup>31</sup>

He subscribed to *Down Beat* magazine to stay current on new jazz releases, but most of what was being advertised and reviewed in *Down Beat* did not satisfy his desire for avant-garde jazz until he began seeing ads for recordings by musicians like Archie Shepp and Roswell Rudd on a new record label, Impulse! This allowed him to track down the recordings for his own collection: “So thank god there was a music store in town called Jenkins Music. . . In those days . . . they had a fairly decent jazz vinyl couple of aisles. However, there was no Archie Shepp, Roswell Rudd, Bill Dixon, any of these people to be found in any of those bins.” So he found that Jenkins Music would order the albums for him: “It was like, you know, somebody waiting for a lottery ticket or something. They would call me and say, ‘Oh, Mr. Youngstein, your latest Archie Shepp is in.’ Oh! My god.” Like Arny Young, he would listen to his new records in the music library of the conservatory: “And I would sit in there and I would nut out. I would go, ‘My god, this is the greatest shit.’ . . . I was just like, this stuff is *it* for me.”<sup>32</sup> In a 1976 interview, Youngstein expanded on his attraction to avant-garde jazz: “One reason that I was interested in the avant-garde had to do with my attitude about playing. I felt that I should play everything. And to do that you have to listen to everything. But there was something special about the sound of the avant-garde that pulled me. There was a certain harmonic freedom and something that drew me soul-wise to people like Roswell and Archie.”<sup>33</sup>

This enthusiastic listening in the conservatory’s library would bring Youngstein and Young together. Young says he moved into the dormitories at UMKC over the summer, when

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Chuck Berg, "Profile: Noah Young," *Down Beat*, December 16 1976, 41-3.

only a few students were living there; one of them happened to be Richard Youngstein. Young remembers it as an important event: “There’s one guy there, and he’s the most important guy in Kansas City avant-garde, really. His name was Richard Youngstein, and he was a bass player from New York. And he turned me on to everything, I mean not just the straight-ahead stuff, but the out—he was the first guy I knew that had avant-garde records.”<sup>34</sup> Youngstein, too, places importance on their meeting and adds a few more details to the narrative: “So one day I don’t remember, I think Army happened to be there in the music library, and he came over to me . . . and he said, What are you listening to? And I started telling him about all this, oh, it’s Archie Shepp, and Roswell and Bill Dixon and Paul Bley and all these people. And the very first time he listened to some of what I had bought, *he* freaked out. ‘Man this stuff is—whoa!—out there—oh!’ So he and I formed like some kind of bond over the both of us really really loving this kind of stuff.”<sup>35</sup>

Young and Youngstein soon met fellow avant-gardist Manford Eaton, a pianist and composer with a burgeoning interest in electronic music. Youngstein description of Eaton emphasizes his Eaton’s “weird” characteristics: he was “e-x-t-r-e-m-e-l-y eccentric” with a “huge like President Garfield kind of beard, you know very imposing kind of thing” and as a “man of few words.” He also mentions being attracted to Eaton’s improvisational style, which he likens to that of saxophonist Lee Konitz on his recording *Motion*, where Konitz “did not play the head on any tune. When the tune started out he was already smoking. And he would take the heads and invert them, play them inside out. It was brilliant.”<sup>36</sup> Young, too, remembers him as an exceptional improviser: “he could play, he could improvise two separate lines with each hand,

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<sup>34</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

he's a music genius."<sup>37</sup> Eaton went on to be an electronic composer in his own right and became more well known for his work in bio-electronic music and technology than in avant-garde jazz piano. His early work was concerned with capturing the signals of various bodily functions (brainwaves, heartbeat, galvanic skin response, etc.) and converting them into sound, thus creating improvised musical performances. During the 1960's he created ORCUS, Inc., a company that developed, manufactured and sold electronic sound equipment. It was there that he developed his ideas and technologies for bio-music. He also authored several articles on his research, one of which is the 1968 paper, "Bio-Potentials as Control Data for Spontaneous Music." In this essay, Eaton says that one of his motives for creating music based on bodily functions was what he saw as limitations of jazz music: "In jazz improvisation the musicians are quite limited by the necessity for predetermined material [and] the improviser, even when improvising alone, is severely limited and guided by the physical restrictions imposed by his body and by the mechanical nature of all conventional instruments"<sup>38</sup> He states that he first thought of this idea in August 1961, which means that he was already developing it when he played with Young and Youngstein in 1965. It is possible that such experiments were encouraged while Eaton was a student at the UMKC Conservatory, but not likely, given the Young and Youngstein's descriptions of the conservatory as a tradition-bound school that heavily emphasized European classical music.

Despite this traditionalist bent, the conservatory also boasted two jazz musicians on faculty, Herb Six and George Salisbury, both pianists. Six wrote and produced a jazz opera while at UMKC called "Without Memorial Banners," based on the life of Charlie Parker. It premiered

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<sup>37</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Manford L Eaton, "Bio-Potentials as Control Data for Spontaneous Music," (ORCUS, 1968), 2.

in Kansas City on March 24, 1966 and went on to play in New York. Six and local poet Dan Jaffe followed that with another jazz opera, “All Cats Turn Grey When the Sun Goes Down,” which premiered in New York in 1971.<sup>39</sup> Salisbury was a revered local jazz musician and educator. He was classically trained as a child and went on to study with Mary Lou Williams and perform and record jazz with Red Callender and Tommy Douglas. He continued his classical training at the conservatory from 1951 to 1956 and joined the faculty in 1957. He remained in Kansas City, teaching at UMKC and performing in various local and nationally touring groups, until he passed in 1986.<sup>40</sup> After his death, the conservatory began a scholarship in his name that continues to this day.

Both Young and Youngstein cite Six and Salisbury as important to their musical and personal development, even if the teachers’ jazz style was more mainstream than they liked to play themselves. Youngstein notes that the two jazz teachers helped Eaton, Youngstein, and Young put on their improvised performance despite the school’s general hostility toward jazz as a proper subject of study. The conservatory stressed music from the European classical tradition heavily, and the musicians knew that presenting their music simply as a “jazz trio” would be difficult. As Youngstein remembers, “there were a couple of real—ugh—snobs at that school,” and one in particular who “would come out and knock on our [rehearsal room] door like he was offended, ‘oh what is this music why is it so loud’ . . . There were a couple people on staff there who were not as obnoxious as he was, but who were, basically came from the same place: ‘what is this? It sounds bizarre, the pianist looks bizarre.’” Youngstein and the other members tried referring to their trio as an “ensemble” because “that was more sophisticated,” Youngstein notes

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<sup>39</sup> "Central Opera Service Bulletin," ed. Metropolitan Opera National Council (1965).

<sup>40</sup> Chuck Haddix, "U.M.K.C. Celebrates the Memory of George Salisbury," *KC Jazz Ambassador*, February/March 1991 1991.

with a laugh, pronouncing “ensemble” with an exaggerated French accent, implying that this would make the trio’s music seem more appropriate for a conservatory setting. Youngstein felt that even many of his fellow students did not respond well to the avant-garde jazz that was becoming more important to him. As he remembers, “They just didn’t understand it, and many of them truthfully didn’t like it. Now, I didn’t *not* like them because they didn’t like it, I just stuck with my own thing.” Despite the conservatory’s overall hostility to jazz and especially avant-garde, the teachers encouraged the three young musicians to put on their performance anyway.<sup>41</sup>

Since the performance would be almost completely improvised, the members of the ensemble even balked at calling it “jazz.” Youngstein remembers that the official form they filled out asked questions of them like “what kind of music is it [laughs] and who it appeals to or something [laughs] . . . And it was very hard for us to actually describe since we had no clue what was gonna be coming off, but we had to say something so we said it’s ‘trio jazz.’” Youngstein describes the group as being limited by genre categories but also using those categories to their own advantage. The trio would have been aware of only a few avenues to present their original improvised music, but Youngstein said he felt resistance to avant-garde jazz at the conservatory and mere tolerance of jazz of any kind. Realizing they need the institution’s approval for their performance, and understanding that what they call their music determines in some ways how the music gets heard, they chose a broad term that would be acceptable to all parties, “trio jazz.” This was a fluid negotiation of naming that both reaffirms the dominance of genre categories in institutions like conservatories and flouts those categories through actual sonic practices. At the same time, it almost guarantees that their music was heard as “jazz” in some way, whether they wanted it to be heard that way or not. Their music thus

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<sup>41</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

sounds “weird” in this retelling—it was both avant-garde and mainstream at once, even contradictorily.

Youngstein’s laughing here suggests that he sees his music as “weird” and complicating the bureaucratic procedures of the school. He continues that after submitting their form, “somebody got wind” of the group’s application for the performance and would not allow it to be put on. Either Six or Salisbury told him that the possibilities were not good, and Youngstein recalls, “And I wasn’t shocked, it’s like, oh well, it’s Kansas City! Not New York! Not San Francisco! Not Chicago! It’s Kansas City.” Remembering his positioning as a native New Yorker living in Kansas City and studying jazz at a conservatory in the early 1960’s, Youngstein here expresses both disappointment and a sense of fatalism at the school’s first refusal to allow their performance. His attitude is one commonly held about Kansas City—that its place in the Midwestern “flyover” states, as well as its reputation as a cradle of jazz that has is no longer important, makes it inhospitable to innovative or experimental music. Of course, Youngstein is himself part of that innovative music, a Kansas City outsider but an avant-garde insider. And, as he notes, the concert did get put on, after all, with the help of Six and Salisbury, two mainstream jazz musicians and faculty.<sup>42</sup>

The group’s rehearsals were unconventional in some ways, too. Instead of rehearsing chord changes and arrangements or repeating particular passages until they were precise, as they might have been used to doing in the conservatory or with mainstream jazz groups, the group’s rehearsals were more conceptual. Youngstein links this rehearsal style to the classical avant-garde:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Our rehearsals as best as I can recall . . . we would really talk more about concepts and ideas, kind of like, who was the classical avant, Xenakis or people like that, or like Cage, you would give out numbers, so you would say okay we're gonna get loud over here and you get soft, or you stomp your feet and you take your bow and bow the air with it or something, you know? There weren't any specific—because again we didn't play tunes.

There were no tunes. So [laughing] which was great, I love it. Who wants to play tunes?

Here Youngstein exhibits some exhilaration at breaking with the jazz tradition and classical tradition at the same time, and managing to get the performance on stage. He played classical music and mainstream jazz well and was busy doing both at the time in Kansas City, but he relished the opportunity to play music that was more spontaneous, interactive, and original than the “tunes” of standard jazz practice.<sup>43</sup>

The concert's program lists six songs, the first and last of which are “ALL ALONE” by Irving Berlin. The Tajjasa Ensemble is given as the collective composers of the remaining four pieces, whose titles are anagrams of “ALL ALONE,” like “LAL OLANE” and “LLL NEOAA.” The titles are playful; they refer to the jazz tradition but also suggest that the performance will rearrange that tradition into something unfamiliar, to take a “tune” and play with it, just as the titles do with anagrams. It is also a rejection of the idea that one must have piece titles at all, or resisting the classical notion that pieces are predetermined and programmed in order to let the audience know what to expect. As Youngstein notes, even they didn't know exactly what they would be doing musically, so they were reluctant to describe their music to the programmers at the conservatory.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

According to the program, the performance also included use of prerecorded sound—readings in French of poems by Baudelaire and from the novels of Lawrence Durrell. This use of tape reflects the influence of contemporary classical composers like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who were touring campuses at this time and giving lectures about their compositional processes. Both composers made stops in Lawrence and Kansas City in the sixties, and several musicians and fans from that time have mentioned Cage’s appearances as important to their own musical development.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, these composers influenced avant-garde musical practices in classical music, jazz and other genres. Anthony Braxton, Don Ellis, Frank Zappa, among a host of others in the 1960’s and 1970’s cite these composers as important to their work. It is not surprising, therefore, that audiences and musicians in Kansas City and Lawrence would remember their visits. Much like the territory bands of the 1930’s who toured through places like Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas, and spread their blues-based big band music around the region, Cage and Stockhausen toured colleges and conservatories throughout the U.S., spreading new compositional techniques and new “weird” sounds across the country. Even so, Youngstein comments that a performance of avant-garde jazz that included collective improvisation and tape composition seemed unusual for Kansas City in the 1960’s, especially at a classically oriented conservatory: “Basically, there were no tunes, we just played [laughing] which was, I mean, Kansas City? I mean even then I knew something was not right with that picture. There we were on stage of the hallowed halls of the conservatory!” He also was aware of the consequences of marrying jazz with avant-garde classical practices, noting a time

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<sup>44</sup> Bob Bogan. Interview with author. July 12, 2011.,

when trumpeter and composer Don Ellis was “booed off the stage in LA” for performing John Cage’s piece *4’33”* at a jazz club.<sup>45</sup>

According to Young, Eaton insisted that the audience arrive early for the performance and that no one be admitted late. The concert began with the house lights down and the stage fully lit. Then the taped material was played, consisting of dialogue read by Eaton and his wife and also including sounds of their breathing, all of which was played backward. The group then played the “head” or melody of Berlin’s song with standard chord changes and in a medium swing tempo. The middle four pieces were collectively improvised and may have been played continuously without breaks for the entire concert. Young also remembers using an expanded drum set: “I had a little xylophone off to one side, I had kind of a music stand with a towel on it to use as a percussion stand, and I had a tambourine and a triangle thing and then I had like one tympani.” After the collective improvisation, the group concluded with another statement of Berlin’s “All Alone” similar to the opening.

In a photograph of the performance, the group wears sober dark suits, their instruments huddled together on the stage. Eaton wears a long beard and Youngstein a wispy moustache, giving them a mature look. Young, in contrast, is clean shaven and adolescent looking. (A pituitary deficiency caused him to look younger than his age of nineteen years at the time.) Youngstein stands with his bass close to the piano’s crook on his right and Young’s ride cymbal and extra percussion on his left. Eaton and Young make eye contact behind Youngstein’s back, focused on each other’s playing. Young is turned to the side of his drum set, playing what appears to be a timbale with his left hand, using traditional grip on his drumstick. Young also

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<sup>45</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

remembers using extended techniques to achieve a wider range of sounds from the drums, such as rolling a drumstick across the floor.<sup>46</sup>

According to the group, the audience consisted of some conservatory faculty—including the group’s mentors, Herb Six and George Salisbury—and some students. Young remembers being able to see some of his friends in the front row, despite the darkened house. He said his friend and mentor, drummer Charles McFarland, also attended and especially liked Young’s extended techniques. While some of the audience was sympathetic and supportive, most were not, in Young’s memory: “I think about 90 percent of the people were like conservatory students or conservatory teachers and they *very definitely* did not like it. [Laughs] I think a few walked out, I remember a bunch of people walking out after like the second tune.”<sup>47</sup>

Youngstein also remembers playing in another group that “took it out,” a quartet of Travis Jenkins on tenor saxophone, Darrell DeVore on piano, Youngstein on upright bass, and Charles McFarland on drums. Jenkins was born in Texas but grew up in Kansas City, KS, and Kansas City, MO.<sup>48</sup> Jenkins learned jazz early, but he remembers he and a friend also “freely improvising on the chord changes” of Western classical music, too, not just jazz standards. He was drafted into the US Army in 1961 after having played locally and toured nationally. He returned to Kansas City in 1965 after spending time in New York playing with avant-gardists like Don Cherry, Pharoah Sanders, Jack DeJohnette and Sunny Murray, as well as in drug rehabilitation in Osawatomie, KS. He then began playing with local mainstream jazz musicians like Gary Sivils and Tommy Ruskin and at the Kansas City Jazz Festival with Youngstein. Arny Young considers him a mentor and remembers that in the mid-1960’s, “he was already playing

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<sup>46</sup> Young interview,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Former Local Jazz Musician Travis Jenkins Dies," *KC Jazz Ambassador* 2004.

sort of like Trane, when it wasn't really free yet but was stretching, you know, and Travis could really—Travis was a guy who could play any Charlie Parker tune in any key, just a total master.”<sup>49</sup> Youngstein remembers Jenkins as a dynamic performer who added bodily movement to his playing. Youngstein recalls, “Travis every so often would start playing a solo—which were always awesome—he'd either start doing a jig or dancing while he was playing . . . One time in the middle of a solo, he turned around and he walked off the stage and went into the men's room and continued playing. Now that was out.” Jenkins' performances as described here resemble those of the showy “barwalkers” of rhythm and blues in the 1940's and 1950's, and avant-garde practices in many of the arts explore and play with space in unusual ways. Jenkins left Kansas City again for New York's East Village, playing with Bill Dixon, Howard Johnson, Eddie Palmieri, and Roswell Rudd, among others. He later toured with Charles Mingus, wrote commercial jingles in Memphis, TN, and travelled with his wife, anthropologist Carol Jenkins, all over the world, jamming with and recording musicians in Belize, New Guinea, and Bangladesh.<sup>50</sup> He died of cancer in 2004, and Carol established an award in his name for Harm Reduction International that is given “to a current or former drug user who has made an outstanding contribution to reducing drug-related harm,” which was later renamed the Carol and Travis Jenkins Award after Carol's death in 2009.<sup>51</sup>

Darrell DeVore was born in St. Joseph, MO, in 1939. He showed talent for the piano at an early age and was largely self-taught. Having already established himself in Kansas City's jazz scene by the early 1960's, he attended the UMKC Conservatory, where he met Youngstein and studied with George Salisbury. Youngstein remembers:

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<sup>49</sup> interview, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> “The Amazing Odyssey of Travis Jenkins,” *KC Jazz Ambassador* 2000.

<sup>51</sup> “Harm Reduction International Awards,” accessed June 4, 2012. <http://www.ihra.net/awards>.

Darrell was one of the most unique people and musicians that I had ever and still have ever met in my life. . . . I met Darrell—he was a country boy—but again our tastes in music and our ideas and what we were interested in doing really clicked. We got to be really really good friends, got to meet his wife and young kids and the whole thing. He had this kind of scrappy house there not far from the conservatory.<sup>52</sup>

DeVore was mostly self-taught, and he remembers revealing as much to Salisbury when he auditioned, admitting, “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing!”<sup>53</sup> Young remembers meeting DeVore at the conservatory and the two of them hitting it off: “We’d get together and just listen to music all the time, just for hours.” He also notes DeVore’s talent for picking up instruments quickly, including jazz piano: “He just decided okay I want to be a jazz piano player, and all the jazz guys in town went, ‘yeah right.’ Six months later he was playing his ass off.”<sup>54</sup> At the conservatory, DeVore learned theory and chord structure from Salisbury and began composing his own music for the quartet to perform. Youngstein recalls: “He began to come up with these little oddball tunes, very unique, kind of very simple and no really changes on them . . . very non-descript, but the tunes had such a—whimsical, fantasy, very odd, yet they swung. They were in 3, 4, 6, 2 whatever.” The quartet’s rehearsals, much like those for the Tajasa Ensemble, were somewhat unconventional. Youngstein remembers that DeVore “said ‘well I’d kind of like to hear something like this over here and something like that.’”<sup>55</sup> In this way, DeVore was perhaps setting up a melodic framework and making suggestions for the rest of the members, but not dictating their interaction or overall accompaniment very strictly, as in with chord changes or

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<sup>52</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Daedalus Howell, "Darrell Devore and the Gospel," accessed <http://dhowell.com/darrell-devore-and-the-gospel/>.

<sup>54</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

other more specific musical notation. DeVore left Kansas City for San Francisco in the late 1960's where he helped form the psychedelic rock band The Charlatans. He later rejected a major-label pop recording contract and became a fixture on the San Francisco music scene, making his own instruments out of bamboo and wood, opening a recording studio, playing with singer/songwriter Tom Waits, and teaching non-Western musical techniques and notation in local schools. He passed away in 2005.<sup>56</sup>

Young remembers Charles McFarland as a drummer who “wasn’t into the out shit, but man the way he played drums just blew me away . . . He was playing the way people like Elvin Jones and Tony Williams were playing way back when, which wasn’t ahead at the time, but nobody else was doing that [in Kansas City]. . . . He had a big effect on my drumming.” Young remembers McFarland leaving Kansas City in 1968 and not returning.

The Darrell DeVore Trio, with Youngstein and McFarland, played at the Kansas City Jazz Festival in 1966, and the performance was captured on a soundboard recording. The group played two original songs, “Young Day in a Far Land” and “Peaceful Traffic,” and a version of Carla Bley’s “Syndrome.” All three of these would be unusual choices in this setting—two original compositions and one by a woman composer unknown to mainstream jazz audiences at the time. “Young Day” opens with open chords in the piano in fourths and fifths, influenced heavily by modal jazz of the time by McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and others. The drummer plays straight time and the bass a simple rhythmic pattern that emphasizes the roots of the chords. The sound of this song resembles Herbie Hancock’s recording of “Dolphin Dance” from the year before. The overall rhythm shifts to swing for DeVore’s piano solo, then alternates from straight to swing time, with DeVore continuing the McCoy Tyner-like open

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<sup>56</sup> Howell, "Darrell Devore".

fourths and fifths in his left hand while he plays faster, more linear melodies in his right.

Youngstein solos over the chord changes with similar shifts from straight to swing feel and the piano dropping out almost completely. The whole group returns with a restatement of the melody.

After this piece, DeVore softly announces its title as well as the next one in a high, meek voice. “Peaceful Traffic” is in triple meter, although various members of the group emphasize a polyrhythmic two-over-three rhythm throughout the performance, giving it a shifting and propulsive feel. The tune begins with chime-like open fifths high up on the piano and moves into a lilting melody in a major key, with augmented chords adding a wistfulness to the song. This is followed by a brief contrasting section in which the entire band plays accented beats in the two-over-three rhythm, almost like an “oompah” sound. The light, airy melody returns before DeVore solos over the chord structure established in this opening melody statement. DeVore plays some high runs down the keyboard accompanied again by the Tyner-like left hand chording, as well as some standard blues-inflected licks that McFarland picks up on and accents with his snare. The two-over-three section is accented again and McFarland plays big block chords over it this time before returning to the lilting melody and harmony of the first section. Youngstein solos over these changes while the drums stop playing completely for at least 16 bars. He confines most of his melodies to the middle and lower registers of the bass—which he told me he prefers, because of the rich, deep sound of the bass in those areas. He contrasts this with some fluttering passages high up on the neck and ends with double-stop strumming and a short melody in octaves. The piano re-enters and trades eight bars with the drummer before the melody is restated.

DeVore introduces the final piece, nervously clearing his throat after some microphone feedback. The tune, Carla Bley's "Syndrome," is in a fast, swing tempo and consists of a short melody statement repeated in different registers over modal harmony. For the solos, the group is at its most adventurous. DeVore continues his Tyner-style left hand, this time to more dramatic effect, playing chords in both hands to build in intensity. Youngstein and McFarland pick up on these rhythmic passages and play along with him, Youngstein departing from a walking bass line to play counter melodies higher up on the bass. Youngstein plays a bass solo without steady time or chord changes, while DeVore lays out and McFarland plays some light cymbal flourishes. Youngstein plays plucked double stops with a constant drone on a lower string and a high, eastern-mode melody on a upper string that alternates between major and minor thirds. He also plucks the strings above the bridge, making a percussive, kalimba-like sound, alternated with bluesy slides and diminished arpeggios. McFarland plays a flashy, technical unaccompanied solo that begins in time and then moves out of time; bass and drums return to the original tempo, and the piano restates the melody.<sup>57</sup>

This was the second year of the festival, which every year featured local mainstream jazz musicians like Salisbury and trombonist Arch Martin along with touring big bands, nationally known jazz acts, and university jazz competition winners. DeVore's trio played at 3:20 in the afternoon, preceded by the Reginald Buckner Quartet, consisting of local jazz organist Buckner, along with a trombonist, tenor saxophonist, and drummer, playing up-tempo bop standards like "It's Alright with Me." On the soundboard recording, the announcer can be heard introducing DeVore's group: "This group is very contemporary. Is 'avant-garde' a good word, Darrell? No, you don't like that. Just contemporary." DeVore's response is not recorded on the audio, and no

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<sup>57</sup> Darrell DeVore, "Darrell Devore Trio." Kansas City Jazz Festival, 1966. Tape 38.

video exists, but the listener can imagine him shaking his head to the announcer's question. The announcer marks them as having a different sound from other acts at the festival, but DeVore himself rejects the term "avant-garde" to describe his group. While this performance may not be categorized as "avant-garde" by DeVore and others, especially with its reliance on chord structure, individual solos over accompanying background, and constant rhythm, it does play with jazz conventions significantly, especially in harmony and rhythm.

To try to determine the precise difference between "very contemporary" and "avant-garde" would be difficult, but we can speculate about the use of those terms in this context. Perhaps DeVore thought that term came with too much baggage at a festival that also featured Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Al Cohn, and Clark Terry, or perhaps he did not consider his music avant-garde, a term that would have set off many alarms in 1966 Kansas City. The fact that the announcer has some trouble categorizing the music means that it may have sounded "weird" to him; that is, eluding classification based on whatever genre terms he was aware of. But no other musicians were asked this question, so this moment would have marked this group as different, as if the announcer needed to prepare the audience, who may have attended the festival to hear big bands and bop standards, for the "weird" performance they were about to hear. This was a moment when the widely circulated genre categories of dominant jazz historiography were brought to bear on sounds that it wanted to manage and control by labeling them. The announcer acted as an agent of that control, but he also demonstrated some flexibility by allowing DeVore some input into categorizing his own music. Even so, this moment would still signal to the audience that they were about to hear something "weird."

Devore's public rejection of the term "avant-garde" perhaps indicates his awareness of this delicate moment; he can reassure the big band audience that his music is "weird" (that is,

“contemporary”), but not too “weird” (that is, “avant-garde”). Perhaps he wanted to exert some influence over how his music would be heard in the larger context of a jazz festival that advertised its commitment to jazz of the past. And perhaps he was aware of public notions that depict any avant-garde movement as antagonistic and elitist (and thus “undesirable”). As George Lewis points out in his history of the AACM, any act of “self-naming and self-fashioning” is a also a transformation of a musical identity. “Being a ‘creative musician’ in this sense,” he argues, “is an act of perpetual becoming, an assertion of mobility that can take one anywhere at all, beyond the purview of genre or method.”<sup>58</sup> As Lewis demonstrates in his study, any discussion of avant-garde jazz, struggles over ownership and meaning in jazz, and social positioning also has to do with race; I will expand on the racial and raced aspects of naming below.

Whatever his reasons for rejecting the term, the sound of the group was certainly more “out” than much else being played at the festival that year. The festival program explains that its purpose was to “remind” people about Kanas City’s jazz past, especially to teach “a new generation growing up listening to rock ‘n’ roll, unexposed to the music that began in America.” This clear jab at the popularity of British Invasion bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones does not appear to be intended for younger fans, but for older, more conservatives ones wanting to be reminded of jazz’s “golden age.” DeVore, Youngstein, and McFarland were young people at the time, in their twenties who listened to the new popular music on the radio as well as to the new, more adventurous modal jazz and avant-garde. Such ecumenical tastes appear to be out of step with the festival’s conservative stance. Based on the audible yet tepid applause on the performance tapes, however, the audience appreciated these young avant-gardists in Kansas City to some degree. The only mention of the performance in the local press came in a review of the

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<sup>58</sup> Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, xl.

festival's sound equipment in the *Kansas City Times*, which stated that "the mute, moody music of Darrell DeVore and the mad churning power of the 16-piece Willie Rice band were both easily handled by the sound system."<sup>59</sup>

The following year, DeVore's trio was joined by Travis Jenkins on tenor saxophone, and once again labeled "avant-garde." Billed as Travis Jenkins with the Darrell DeVore Quartette, the group played at 5 p.m. on April 2, 1967, preceded by the Wichita State University Jazz Lab Band doing Stan Kenton arrangements and local swing/bop favorites the Pete Eye Trio. DeVore's group was immediately followed by a dixieland group led by Samuel "Baby" Lovett, a veteran drummer of the early days of Kansas City jazz. Wedged in amongst modern university big bands, cocktail jazz trios, and dixieland revivalists, the DeVore Quartette certainly was, in the words of the announcer, "something new in modern music today—avant-garde, if you will."<sup>60</sup> The announcer's "if you will" here indicates a cautious use of the phrase "avant-garde" to describe the group, but less tentative than his use of the term the year before. This time, the announcer does not give the group the chance to accept or reject that label. DeVore's group might have sounded and looked "weird" to the audiences in this festival, given the festival's programming directed toward families, students, and fans of Kansas City swing, the big band era, and bebop. The announcer's use of "avant-garde" seems like a way of preparing the audience for the somewhat different sounds they were about to hear. As Bernard Gendron notes, avant-garde jazz had been accepted into the wider jazz canon by 1966, at least in the pages of

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<sup>59</sup> "Kansas City Jazz Festival," *Kansas City Times*, May 2 1966.

<sup>60</sup> Travis Jenkins with the Darrell Devore Quartette, vol. Tape 57, *Kansas City Jazz Festival* (Marr Sound Archive, Ed Roche Collection, 1967).

*Down Beat* magazine.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the announcer's introduction indicates this acceptance of avant-garde jazz; the mere presence of the group at the festival would also indicate this overall acceptance.

On the soundboard recording from the 1967 festival, the group certainly sounds different from what was before and after them in the program, resembling the contemporary work of saxophonist Wayne Shorter's groups or of John Coltrane's quartet. Jenkins has an edgy, thin, and biting tenor saxophone sound, similar to Shorter's or Coltrane's, and DeVore continues his Tyner-influenced left hand chords to even greater dramatic effect than is evinced on the 1966 performance. The first piece, "The Omen," is announced by Jenkins in his low, casual baritone voice. It is in a fast triple meter and begins with a tense minor chord vamp. The melody, played by Jenkins, runs up the horn twice before ending in a lilting major melody and a bluesy riff. Jenkins' tough sound and blues-inflected phrasing dominates his solo, with some high, Coltrane-like blowing at the upper end of the horn that cracks and splits. Jenkins doesn't appear to be soloing over a preset chord structure but rather over a static modal vamp, held together by DeVore and Youngstein. Interplay among DeVore, McFarland, and Jenkins builds in rhythmic intensity at several points during the piece. Youngstein plays a bowed bass solo, with double stops and fast runs; the audience applauds in the middle of this section, impressed with Youngstein's energy and technique. He appears to respond to the audience by furiously bowing higher up on the bass, but then he leaves the bow for single pizzicato notes and wide-interval double stops. DeVore and McFarland, having dropped out, softly reenter here, building up the tune's original minor vamp. The piece ends with another restatement of the melody.

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<sup>61</sup> Bernard Gendron, "After the October Revolution: The Jazz Avant-Garde in New York, 1964-65," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford University Press, 2009), 227.

“The next tune was written expressly for the festival,” Jenkins announces dryly. “It’s called ‘Piece for the Festival.’” The audience laughs at Jenkins’ deadpan delivery of this title, which may also be a pun on “piece” and “peace.” The song does indeed begin peacefully, with softly bowed bass and angular piano lines resolving into descending arpeggiated chords, resembling Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” or works by modern jazz pianists like Bill Evans or Keith Jarrett. This peaceful feel continues with a major key melody in the tenor saxophone and the rubato feel in the rest of the band, stretching and pulling the time. Then DeVore, Youngstein, and McFarland begin a straight-eights groove, similar to a bossa or boogaloo. Jenkins plays the same melody as in the introduction, this time over modal harmony with quickly shifting chords at the end of each phrase. DeVore’s piano solo builds in intensity several times by using big block chords in both hands, playing tense harmonies in polyrhythms over 4/4 time, which bass and drums follow, giving these moments an unstable and tense feel. For Jenkins’ solo, the band suddenly breaks into 4/4 swing, as if it were planned or perhaps signaled by one of the band members. Youngstein walks a quarter note bass line, and McFarland plays a standard swing pattern on ride and hi hat cymbals, but DeVore lays out while Jenkins solos. The chordal structure here is open and not explicitly stated; Youngstein stays close to the overall tonal center of the piece with some motivic movement away from and back to the center, and Jenkins deftly moves in and out of this tonal center as well. Toward the end of the tenor saxophone solo, DeVore enters with big, tense block chords again, Jenkins adopts an edgy tenor sound with screaming polyphonics in the upper register, and McFarland punctuates this change with bass drum and crash cymbal “bombs.” The tense modal feel continues through DeVore’s solo, but the whole group adds the quick-moving chords they played in the original statement of the melody. Youngstein plays a largely unaccompanied bass solo free of the piece’s chords or steady rhythm.

He uses strummed double stops, slides, and fast single-note phrases while DeVore plays some angular chords lightly. Youngstein also bends a string around the neck of the bass and plucks it, creating a tight buzzing sound; DeVore answers this by lightly plucking a few of the piano strings. This back and forth interplay gradually devolves into McFarland's drum solo, centered mostly on the snare drum but contrasting it with melodic use of the tom toms. He ends with a loud snare roll into a cymbal crash, and the rest of the band enters, playing the rubato melody as in the beginning of the piece.<sup>62</sup>

DeVore's title "Piece for the Festival" might be somewhat sarcastic, as if they felt obligated to write a piece in 4/4 swing in order to fit in with the rest of the program. But the piece also includes several different genre feels and changes, perhaps as a mirror of the festival itself, an attempt to capture all of the genres represented there and to fit in avant-garde techniques within it. It might be seen as a demonstration to the festival that avant-garde jazz has its place in the jazz canon and thus in jazz history.

Two photographs of Youngstein from this performance show him wearing a fairly conservative suit and tie, but also sporting hair down to his collar and "mod" style sunglasses. Both photographs show him in action at the festival, between a piano and a drum set (although only the part of the ride cymbal is visible). In one shot, Youngstein bows what appears to be a harmonic note high up on the neck of the bass, his glasses halfway down the bridge of his nose. In the other photograph, his left hand blurs as it strums across the strings. These photographs suggest somewhat avant-garde techniques for jazz bass, reminiscent of David Izenzon, Jimmy Garrison or other avant-garde jazz bass players at the time. The recording confirms these

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<sup>62</sup> Travis Jenkins with the Darrell Devore Quartette.

techniques, as well as some unusual piano-string plucking from DeVore. Youngstein remembers the performance this way:

We didn't play any traditional tunes, we played some Darrell originals, and I think one of them was actually a spontaneous improv. From what the reviews were, we blew everybody away, and it was certainly, we were the only . . . group that did anything other than play straight-ahead shit or Latin or some other kind of business. We were smokin, that's all there is to it...And we took it out.<sup>63</sup>

At the 1967 festival, the group did not play a piece that was entirely “a spontaneous improv” (at least according to the soundboard recording), but they did “take it out,” incorporating elements of free improvisation and extended playing techniques into overall song forms. Many of the song structures relied on modal vamps, allowing the group to stretch out harmonically, rhythmically, and melodically, while keeping a tonal center throughout. These elements of their performance were much different from the performances of the heavily orchestrated big bands, torch-song and blues singers, and standard-playing bop groups who also played the festival that year, such as Lou Rawls, Stan Kenton, Herb Ellis, and local favorites, the George Salisbury-Arch Martin Quartette. But they were included in the program's section listing “Stars of the 1967 Festival.” DeVore is described as a pianist “who almost overnight appeared as a striking young jazz man,” and Jenkins as an in-demand saxophonist who “travels for appearances with various combos.”<sup>64</sup>

If these forays into avant-garde jazz received mixed reviews and tepid acceptance by the Kansas City jazz mainstream, they were more enthusiastically accepted by other audiences in the city. Both Young and Youngstein cite the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI) as an important institution in their early avant-garde development, providing young enthusiastic audiences who

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<sup>63</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Tom Stites, "Kansas City Jazz Festival 1967 Official Program," (1967).

were more receptive to their musical experiments than the mainstream jazz scene audiences in Kansas City jazz clubs. Young remembers, “The Art Institute really changed my whole life because . . . they were the first people . . . that liked my music.”<sup>65</sup> In the 1960’s, KCAI was across Warwick St. from the conservatory, facilitating social and creative interaction between the two student bodies. As Youngstein remembers, “Many afternoons and some evenings, depending on how late the classes went or whatever, uh, there was a lot of comingling of the *artistes* from both the easel and paintbrush school and the keyboard and bass school and whatever.” He notes that the students made intimate creative, social, and sexual connections, and shared whatever illicit substances were popular at the time. “I don’t how most of us ever graduated,” he said, “It was insane.”<sup>66</sup> Whether or not their drug use affected their school work, the connection with young, vibrant arts scene in Kansas City in the 1960’s certainly fostered their musical growth and encouraged their experimental efforts. The encouragement these musicians received from KCAI students and Salisbury and Six at the conservatory were crucial at this time, because the musicians did not have many opportunities to play avant-garde music, to experiment musically, or even to play much original music. However, both Young and Youngstein, as well as McFarland, were active in the mainstream jazz scene, playing standards for dinner crowds and at nightclubs. Youngstein also played regularly in Frank Smith’s trio, with pianist Dave Zollar.

After finishing his degree at the conservatory in 1967, Youngstein moved back to New York, where he performed regularly with Roswell Rudd, Sheila Jordan, Chris Connor, and Paul Bley, and with his own group, Richard Youngstein and the Inner Peace Ensemble (retaining the “sophisticated” name of his band). He also played in clubs and concerts with Bill Dixon and Judith Dunn, Robin Kenyatta, Karl Berger, and Jacques Coursil. He was also active on the jazz

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<sup>65</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

loft scene and briefly reunited with Travis Jenkins in New York to form a trio with drummer Cleve Pozar. He can be heard on Carla Bley's 1972 long-form jazz work *The Escalator over the Hill* and Paul Bley and Annette Peacock's 1971 album *The Paul Bley Synthesizer Show*. He moved to Los Angeles in 1975, continued playing in a wide range of jazz groups and on film soundtracks. He is now a practicing psychologist and continues to play and record in Los Angeles.

Arny Young remembers that many of the musicians who played avant-garde jazz left Kansas City during the late 1960's: Youngstein to New York and then Los Angeles, DeVore to San Francisco, and Jenkins to New York and elsewhere. This left Young with the sense that he had to "carry the torch" for avant-garde jazz in Kansas City on his own. He soon began playing with other musicians and introducing them to avant-garde jazz recordings, much in the same way that Youngstein had done for him. With these musicians, especially Joe Ruddick and Jack Blackett, he began his next group, *Advertisement for a Dream*. Both Ruddick, a pianist, and Blackett, a saxophonist, had been playing in R&B bands in Kansas City and touring, but they did not listen to much jazz, let alone avant-garde jazz, according to Young. To introduce them to more "out" music, he led them through a process of acclimation that he describes this way:

I first started playing funky jazz for them like Les McCann, or "Filthy McNasty, part 2" by Horace Silver, or "Sidewinder" [by Lee Morgan] or played the funky stuff for them. And they were like "Oh wow, we like that. That's cool." So then I got them up to like Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the swinging stuff. And they were like, "aw man what is that? I love that." They never listened to jazz, so—they weren't totally unaware, but they just never listened to it . . . But then I gradually turned them on farther—I got them on to

Trane, then finally I hit them with Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and everything, and they loved it!<sup>67</sup>

Young jokingly says that “What I did was just pervert them” by influencing their musical tastes toward the avant-garde. In Young’s conception, avant-garde jazz constitutes a weird “perversion” of the “normal” jazz associated with dominant jazz historiography. To pervert someone using avant-garde jazz is to lead them away, step by step, from those totalizing stereotypes, myths, and repeated sounds in the era of repetition, and toward noise. It is also like a sexual perversion—a supposedly deviant sexual behavior that ends up being as much about pleasure and power as supposedly normal sexual behaviors. Young’s use of “perversion” here might be similar to queer theorists’ use of “queer”: adopting a term originally intended as a term of derision and redeploying it as both a critical operative and a badge of honor that celebrates difference.

The group he formed also included bassist John Nichols, as well as occasional compatriots Steve MacLane and Greg Meise, both percussionists. The music they created wasn’t “just free improvisation. Like we did this Ahmad Jamal tune that had 124 bars. We played stuff that was totally written out, we had stuff where it’s instructions on a sheet of paper.” And the musical influence went both ways, because “the guys they turned me on to were like Sly and the Family Stone and stuff like that, which I really like.” Indeed, the band’s free explorations often tended to gravitate toward a funk backbeat, combining the musical strengths of all the players: “it had kind of funk undertones but it wasn’t over strict funk rhythms, but it had a R&B mentality to it, because that’s what their roots were and I was getting into that, too.” Young points out that other avant groups like the Black Artists Group (BAG) and the Art Ensemble of Chicago used

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<sup>67</sup> Young interview, 2012.

funk rhythms and instrumentation in their avant-garde music, too.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Young played with two musicians loosely associated with St. Louis-based BAG, Jim Miller and Rob Beckner, who had moved to Kansas City to attend the conservatory. In St. Louis, Miller and Beckner had been members of the Human Arts Ensemble, a subsidiary of BAG, in the early 1970's. While BAG was an interdisciplinary and politically conscious collective of African American performers, the Human Arts Ensemble was its multi-racial spin-off, serving as a way for the black members of BAG to create political, social, and musical alliances with progressive whites and other minorities in their fight for equality.<sup>69</sup>

Inspired by the New York loft scene, Young and the other members of Advertisement for a Dream opened their own loft in Kansas City, setting up a performance space in the back of a shop on 39<sup>th</sup> St. The shop, called Maiden America, was owned by Ruddick's wife and sold plants and quilts, among other items. The store took up the front of the space, and the group set up a performance space in the back: "We put in arched foam ceiling hanging on ropes, zigzag, and we covered everything with that, and we got 60 seats out of this old theater they were tearing down, and so we had a concert every Sunday." As Young remembers, the audiences for their shows were enthusiastic and varied, a change from the hostility he received from audiences who may have been expecting to hear more mainstream jazz. These audiences were different: "We had all kinds of people come listen to us, and a lot of them thought we sounded like Frank Zappa, which we didn't sound anything like Frank Zappa, but that's the only thing they'd heard that was weird." Even if Young didn't think the comparison was accurate musically, he understood that the popularity of rock musicians at the time like Zappa, who incorporated avant-garde and jazz

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Looker, *Point from Which Creation Begins*, 88-92.

elements into his music, was one way younger people might approach Young's music, too.<sup>70</sup> Zappa's weird aesthetic combined rock, twelve-tone concert music, jazz, and free improvisation, and his concerts incorporated performance art, theatre, and humor. His music was both familiar and challenging and combined irreverence and fun with high quality musicianship. Many mainstream rock fans in the 1970's would have been familiar with Zappa's weird music and thus may have been attracted to Advertisement for a Dream's funk-based free jazz and irreverent attitude.

As with other avant-garde music past and present, the Kansas City art scene provided venues and opportunities for these groups to perform. Young remembers Advertisement for a Dream playing at the Art Research Center as well as the more established Nelson-Atkins Museum; once the group played "on a giant Persian carpet out in the middle of the big hall" in the Nelson-Atkins. Young remembers "a cool curator back then who would do different things" at the Nelson-Atkins, such as invite Young to play a solo drum recital for the opening of a special exhibit. In this way, visual art circuits in Kansas City opened up opportunities for weird noise to be heard. Eventually, though, personal and musical differences, as well as better paying jobs, split up the group. Ruddick moved to New Jersey in 1973, where he eventually met Philip Johnston, a saxophonist and composer active in New York's downtown avant jazz scene; Ruddick played in Johnston's Transparent Quartet in the 1990's. Blackett and MacLane went on to form Blue Riddim, a Kansas City-based reggae band.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these alliances with the art community, support from friends, faculty, and other musicians, Young and Youngstein do not remember Kansas City's straight-ahead jazz community supporting the avant-garde very much. Young remembers, "All the jazz musicians in

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<sup>70</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

town all said we were full of shit and that we were nuts, and we were abused.”<sup>72</sup> When Young would try to experiment in a straight-ahead jazz setting, he often received scorn from other musicians on the gig: “If I even played a hi-hat on anything but two and four, guys would scream at me! And they would never hire me again . . . I pissed those guys off so much, I would just start playing on the ‘and’ of one [imitates hi hat cymbal pattern with his mouth]. Boy they’d get mad then, and then they’d never hire me again.”<sup>73</sup> Young’s complaints here highlight the ubiquity of the dominant jazz narrative in the era of repetition; it shapes musical and social relationships, even among musicians on the same gig. Limited definitions of what constitute an ostensibly authentic jazz performance—4/4 swing, walking bass line, improvising on set chord changes—are the produce of that dominant narrative, and such definitions. While jazz textbooks, documentaries, and magazines circulate these limited definitions, so do musicians among themselves, whether in formal training or orally in performance or private lessons. This circulation is bodily; it is carried out by and on bodies—bodies that manipulate instruments and move in other ways. When Young is told to play a static rhythmic pattern, he is being told to move his body in a particular way and not in other ways. His “bodily noise,” the use of his left foot to play hi hat cymbals on upbeats, complicates these strict definitions of jazz technique.

The consequences of making “noise” in the era of repetition can be dire. For jazz musicians, it might mean fewer jobs with musicians who are unwilling to hear it, as Young noted. He also noted similar treatment from club owners who relied on dominant definitions of jazz to book acts in their venues. Young notes that when club owners would book Advertisement for a Dream hoping to hear “jazz” music, they would grow angry upon hearing the group’s weird noise. Young remembers one incident that sent the message home:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

One time we played at this club and the guy—it was, the back door next to the stage was a snowy hill going down with deep snow on it—the guy literally threw my drums out into the snow! They threw the guy’s saxophone, they just started grabbing my stuff, and we were grabbing our stuff, trying to—and I had to go through—and there were my sticks and everything was all in the, down and everything—I didn’t have cases then, I was so out of it.<sup>74</sup>

Young also recalls another similar story of rejection by club owners:

We had a steady gig for a while at a place called Bonnie’s Blue Lounge, and uh, we’d play like a little more straight ahead but we’d really stretch it out. As long as it sounded a little like jazz, [the club owner] really didn’t care . . . Me and Joe [Ruddick] and the bass player [John Nichols], we had this way of playing, that even if we were playing a twelve bar blues we could play it for twelve bars the most out shit you’ve ever heard in your life, but we knew right where the time was . . . so we started doing our crazy out thing, and we got fired.<sup>75</sup>

In 1975, after Advertisement for a Dream disbanded and many of Young’s fellow musicians and mentors had left Kansas City, Young moved to New York City to try to break into the wider and more accepting avant-garde scene there, especially in the jazz loft scene in the city’s Lower East Side. Young said he frequented Studio Rivbea among other clubs, but because he did not work much, he returned to Kansas City a year later. Inspired by the loft scene in New York, he began a series he called “Friends and Neighbors” (after Ornette Coleman’s loft album of the same name), with a more ecumenical aesthetic: “I just played music with all kinds of people. I might have like R&B guys and jazz guys and blues guys and hand percussionists all

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

playing at the same time. And I'd invite neighbors to come over and I had these giant rent parties."<sup>76</sup> Here Young established a local community space with an expansive musical vision, if only for a short amount of time. Frustrated with the dwindling opportunities to play original, free improvised music, Young left for San Francisco in 1980, where he played with avant-garde saxophonist Sonny Simmons for two years. He also jammed with members of the ROVA saxophone quartet and met up with Darrell DeVore, his fellow avantist from Kansas City, with whom he reformed a brief musical partnership.

### **Solar Disciples: Sun Ra and Kansas City Avant-garde in the 1980's**

During Young's absence, other musicians influenced by the 1960's and 1970's avant-garde began to play and record in Kansas City, including saxophonist and composer Dwight Frizzell. Frizzell had met Arnold Young at PennyLane Records, a large local record store located at 4128 Broadway in the Westport neighborhood of Kansas City. The store boasted one of the largest inventories in town, especially jazz. Frizzell was a frequent customer there and wrote for the store's free newsletter, the *Penny Pitch*, first published in 1980. The newsletter would later become Kansas City's alternative weekly newspaper, *The Pitch*. Chuck Haddix, preeminent Kansas City jazz historian, also wrote for the *Penny Pitch* at this time. Frizzell and Young bonded over their love of avant-garde jazz and would—along with Jim Miller and Rob Beckner, just in from St. Louis and playing with BAG—listen to their records together often, including David Murray, Sun Ra, and the AACM.<sup>77</sup> Just before Young left for San Francisco, Frizzell interviewed Young for a "blindfold test" feature in the November 1980 issue.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Dwight Frizzell. Interview with author. March 22,

When Frizzell plays for Young a Basie recording from 1939, Young expresses admiration for the music, perhaps remembering his early fascination with Basie and other big band music. He also exhibits a healthy disrespect for Kansas City's current mainstream jazz scene: "[Basie] is real Kansas City jazz—not [contemporary swing-based pianist] Pete Eye . . . no offense intended to any of the fine musicians. But that was the real Kansas City jazz. Let's face it. It all happened before you and I were born, Dwight."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps for Young, Basie created music in 1939 of his time, but musicians like Pete Eye in Kansas City in 1980 were making music too heavily reliant on that past and, one presumes, not forward thinking enough. This tension between innovation and tradition is a continuous debate in jazz communities of musicians, fans, critics, scholars, and others. As someone who is interested in avant-garde jazz, Young values the new and innovative. After this critique, Young says, "Whatever Kansas City jazz is now, I'm sure it's not what people think it is," implying that the dominant ideas of "Kansas City jazz" in circulation ought to be questioned; what "people think" needs to be changed. He is critical of the notion of playing music in the present that is based entirely on the past; while he pays respect to the musical past, he seems to say here that Basie in his time was "noise," was "real" Kansas City jazz. This comment is commensurate with Salim Washington's claim: "The entire history of jazz, with its rapid advancements of styles and genres, could be understood as an avant-garde movement" because jazz musicians "have conducted a continuous search for expansion of the formal parameters available for artistic expression." So when jazz musicians play music that does not try to expand formal boundaries but instead preserves jazz of the past, they ignore the experimentalism that is endemic to jazz.<sup>79</sup> For Washington and for Young, Basie was avant-garde in 1939, but playing his 1939 music in 1980 (or 2012)—that is,

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<sup>78</sup> "Unra," 11.

<sup>79</sup> Washington, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now'," 27-8.

out of historical context—leaves out its avant-garde qualities. For Young, “real Kansas City jazz” pushes boundaries and challenges dominant notions of genre; it might respect past innovations but it does not rely exclusively on sounds from the past.

This sentiment is better expressed later in the blindfold test when Frizzell plays Young a song from a current Sun Ra album, *Strange Celestial Road*. Young says, “Sun Ra is the new Duke Ellington. He has been for years . . . He’s the only one that carried on the heritage of Duke . . . Some people don’t realize that but listen to that music—sounds like Duke Ellington to me . . . Duke Ellington strained through several galaxies.”<sup>80</sup> Young again expresses appreciation of jazz’s history, but is eager to point out how Duke Ellington influenced Sun Ra and how Ra’s music, avant-garde and traditionalist at once, could be so indebted to Ellington’s. Traditionalists would dismiss Ra as “too far out,” and want new music to sound more like Ellington. An avantist like Young recognizes Ellington’s work and looks for similar attitude or spirit in music being made now. Young’s claims about Ellington and Ra are contradictory here, or at least vague. His comments leave us wondering precisely which performances, recordings, or dates of Ra’s measure up to which specifics of Ellington’s music. Even with those details, Young’s notion of jazz history articulated here remains jumbled. According to Young, Pete Eye’s music in 1980, derivative of Basie in 1939, is not “real Kansas City Jazz,” but Sun Ra’s music, derivative of Duke Ellington, “carries on the heritage of Duke” in positive ways. Young’s weird jazz history juxtaposes an irreverence for jazz tradition with a respect for certain figures in jazz’s past that he uses to evaluate performances of the present day. He brings noise to dominant jazz history by critiquing jazz that is too derivative of the past or relies too heavily on it, but he also falls back on some “great men” in jazz history who set standards for jazz performance in the present. Thus,

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<sup>80</sup> Frizzell, "Unra."

“abolishing the star system” for Young does not mean killing the heroes, but rather looking for lines of connection, affinity, and influence that may not exist within the dominant jazz narrative framework. For Ra’s music to be influenced by Ellington’s, it must be “strained through several galaxies” rather than totally derivative of it. Ultimately, Young’s play with notions of influence and authenticity here serves to position him within the larger history of Kansas City jazz—as a rebel and innovator, something of an outcast among jazz traditionalists, but also as a member of a forward-thinking community that values the “weird” in Kansas City jazz.

Young’s irreverent critique of Kansas City jazz tradition here reflects a punk-influenced attitude about the past and traditionalism—that too much reverence for the past can also limit creativity in the present. Indeed, later in the interview he expresses admiration for punk progenitor Iggy Pop, associating punk with a healthy irreverence for history: “Yeah. Iggy and the Stooges. Remember those songs he used to make about what year it was? ‘It’s 1978. It’s already too late.’”<sup>81</sup> For Kansas City jazz as well as for rock music, Young seems to say here, the present is already too late; what is needed instead is music that focuses on the future, like that of Sun Ra. This emphasis on the future, on the ability of music to prophesy, demonstrates an affinity with Attali’s historical method. For Attali, alternative sounds can herald the next era by challenging the distribution of power in its time and under its current economic system. For our own time, this appears as “the permanent affirmation of the right to be different. . . It is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one’s own code and work.”<sup>82</sup> Under the notion of history Young articulates here, Ra’s music might herald the future, but we still live in the age of repetition, where sounds and stories of the “great men” of jazz continue to circulate.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 132.

The blindfold test in the *Penny Pitch* illustrates Young's and Frizzell's mutual affinity for Sun Ra's music and philosophy and as fellow "weird" musicians. At the time of the interview, Frizzell had only recently begun his musical career. Born in Independence, MO, in 1956, he made short experimental films and collected film equipment in high school, and he read about John Cage and Marcel Duchamp outside of school. He also heard Sun Ra's 1965 album *The Magic City* while in high school; he said he was attracted to the "mystery of it. I'm not quite sure what it means."<sup>83</sup> In 1974, he became ordained in the Universal Life Church in order to avoid conscription; he still uses the title "Reverend" today and performs weddings. He attended the Kansas City Art Institute in the late 1970's, where "I had some fantastic teachers that changed my life and writing and art, more concept-oriented art, dealing with perception and everything."<sup>84</sup> Out of this broadening of his artistic conception and deepening of his skills, Frizzell formed a band, Black Crack and the Sole Survivors (later known as Black Crack Revue). In 1976, Frizzell released his first album, *Anal Magic: Beyond the Black Crack*, a collection of sound collages, electronic and acoustic instrument experiments, and instrumental jazz-rock improvisation reminiscent of early Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. Frizzell explains the concept behind the pieces on this album: "The narrative on the record [is] about the possibility of a black hole that had profoundly changed the entire universe except a small band of folks who had escaped and had been plummeted into an alternative time . . . And we were the survivors of that, and the transportation through that Crack was made possible by the time-phasing music [on the album]."<sup>85</sup> This description indicates the influence of Sun Ra on Frizzell, especially the themes of alternative time and space, mysticism, and the power of music to

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<sup>83</sup> Frizzell interview,

<sup>84</sup> Ed Pinsent, "The Grand Scheme: Rev Dwight Frizzell," *Sound Projector* 2000, 122.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

transform experience. The album did not sell much at first and did not receive much wider attention until it was included on the “Nurse with Wound list,” a directory of almost 300 experimental and avant-garde sound artists. The list was first published in the liner notes to the 1979 album *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella* by industrial noise group Nurse with Wound, as a tribute to the artists who influenced their work. The list soon became an underground canon for fans of experimental, avant-garde, and noise music, and Frizzell thus entered that canon.

In 1980, Frizzell met John Cage at an event at the University of Kansas in Lawrence in September and covered it for the *Penny Pitch*. William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg were also present at the event and gave readings later. He published his thoughts in the March 1981 issue of the *Penny Pitch*, recalling one of Cage’s pithy lines from the evening: “To be real is to be surrounded by mystery.” He also commented that Cage seemed “more at home in Lawrence” than Ginsberg or Burroughs, and that “it was a genuine surprise to find the ‘Prophet of Noise’ to be so soft spoken—to discover within the creator of world-acclaimed, sometimes alarming, sometimes sparse music a man of passion, compassion, and unshakeable common sense.”<sup>86</sup> Frizzell’s comments here about Cage would seem to point to qualities he values in avant-garde musicians in general, himself included: innovation and experimentation balanced with practicality and concern for others.

Frizzell met Sun Ra in 1980, and the *Penny Pitch* published a multi-part interview Frizzell conducted with the avant-garde band leader and philosopher, in which the two engage in abstract, heady dialogue. Published alongside ads for rock records and car dealerships, this conversation seems somewhat out of place. But perhaps this is the point: avant-garde jazz like

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<sup>86</sup> James Mandeville, Dwight Frizzell, and Jr. Charles Chance, "Chance Meets Cage," *The Penny Pitch*, March 1981, 12.

Sun Ra made walked the line between high and low cultures, seeming somewhat out of place in both at times, but perhaps critical of those places, at home in others—allowing for a critical stance of both commercial and high art positions. A discussion about philosophy, music, and history from Sun Ra in a commercial publication like the *Penny Pitch* might allow Ra and Frizzell to critique the commercialization of art or the tendency of commercial culture to pander to or underestimate the intelligence of its audiences. The *Penny Pitch* does something different here and allows the abstract conversation to exist alongside the ads and reviews of current chartbusters. Furthermore, the interview was not printed in the “jazz” column of the *Penny Pitch*, but in a separate section. Chuck Haddix’s jazz reviews and club listings covered mainstream jazz, records of older swing and bop styles to the latest in modern jazz improvisation. Frizzell’s interview with Ra does not fit neatly into any of these categories.

In the interview, Ra and Frizzell talk about time, history, and discipline, several themes that are found throughout Ra’s work. Ra tells Frizzell that freedom is not all it’s cracked up to be, that form, restriction, or constraint of some kind is necessary. Total freedom could be dangerous for humanity, if humans did whatever they wanted to do, says Ra: “Suppose lightning started to strike with perfect freedom. Suppose all the elements came to be free the way people say they want to be and they were able to do whatever they wanted to do. Freedom wouldn’t be so nice. It comes down that you got to have forms of discipline. And that’s what I try to teach musicians.”<sup>87</sup> Ra’s balance of freedom with discipline resonates with Danielle Goldman’s analysis of those concepts in her study of dance improvisation. Goldman argues that improvisation is a “practice of freedom” that requires training, preparation, and bodily discipline, so that the improviser can be ready for whatever situations come up. As she states, “a skilled

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<sup>87</sup> Dwight Frizzell, "The Ancient Egyptian Reader: Unfolding the Cosmo-Drama, an Exclusive Interview with Sun Ra, Pt. 2," *Penny Pitch*, April 1981, 13.

improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move.”<sup>88</sup> This awareness of boundaries and on-going discovery of how to move within those boundaries is itself freedom, Goldman argues. As with Sun Ra, freedom for Goldman does not mean that performers (or any social actors, by extension) are “able to do whatever they wanted to do.” Instead, the practice of freedom entails understanding the constraints that are always be present but always changing, and training one’s embodied self how to move within those constraints.

Ra’s emphasis on discipline seemed somewhat antithetical to black struggles that emphasized freedom, and especially musical aspects of freedom in free jazz of the 1960’s and later. As Goldman points out, most of the common conceptions of freedom describe it as an “achievement,” a point at which all struggle ceases, and “something good with vaguely political implications.”<sup>89</sup> What is most important to understanding the political implications of improvisation for Goldman, and perhaps for Ra, is to realize that “one could escape confinement only to enter into or become aware of another set of strictures.”<sup>90</sup> Discipline (for Ra) or preparation and training (for Goldman) are how we can skillfully work against and move within the shifting strictures of history. Still, such notions confront widely held stereotypes about improvisation. Ra admits that when he teaches about discipline, musicians “don’t like it of course.” Frizzell points out that some of them have remained with Ra for a long time, even if they don’t appreciate his idea of discipline. But Ra notes that it is more complex than this simple freedom/discipline binary may imply, and that ultimately he does not want to be a religious

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<sup>88</sup> Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 10.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

figure for his musicians: “Sometimes I tell them to stay away from me. I’m not a minister, I’m not a prophet. I’m not living for anybody . . . If you’re righteous, I don’t want you. If you’re evil, I don’t want you . . .What does it take? How do I know? Something different, something more complex than wicked and righteous.”<sup>91</sup>

By 1982, the *Penny Pitch* had expanded its coverage of music, with separate columns for reviews of the latest metal, classical, reggae, “world” music, and blues recordings, and one for film. There were also at least four jazz review columns, covering big band-era reissues, bebop reissues, new releases from mainstream jazz artists, and new avant-garde releases. Club owner Milton Morris had a regular column of often ribald and sordid reminiscences about Kansas City jazz clubs in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Frizzell also wrote interviews with John Cage, Diamanda Galas and others. In the June 1982 issue, he appears in an anonymously authored article on dance in Kansas City. He is noted as performing with an improvisational dance group called Improvidance in a performance for children:

When three characters suddenly appear in pajama-like outfits and begin to move without obvious direction, and the beanie-hatted musician [Frizzell] waves his clarinet in alphabetic configurations in space (his initials) while playing, the kids become curious and excited. The dancers curve their arms, bow their heads and wave brilliant colored scarves, while another musician plays a miniature electronic keyboard (Casiotone) to describe each movement.<sup>92</sup>

The performers comment on the challenges and rewards of working with children and improvised performance. Frizzell notes that the children were open to their work and that their

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<sup>91</sup> Frizzell, "The Ancient Egyptian Reader: Unfolding the Cosmo-Drama, an Exclusive Interview with Sun Ra, Pt. 2," 13.

<sup>92</sup> "Dancing Westport," *ibid.*, June 1982, 7.

intelligence and creativity should not be underestimated. They “are receptive to such twentieth century concepts as simultaneity, synchronicity, synesthesia and improvisation,” implying, too, that improvised music and dance offers all of those concepts in aesthetic form.<sup>93</sup> Frizzell performed and recorded throughout the 1980’s with his group Black Crack Revue, and in 1986 he put on a 24-hour performance event in Kansas City that included “music, poetry, electronic music, radio plays, dancing, conceptual art performance” among other performances.<sup>94</sup>

### **“More complex lives”: Race, Space, and Kansas City Avant-garde Jazz**

Frizzell’s affinity with Sun Ra takes place along and across imaginary racial lines; it is tied up with questions of who owns terms like “jazz” and “avant-garde,” for whom are certain musical practices boundary-breaking, and whose conventions are being broken. This is a question I will explore more deeply in chapter three, when I look at Mark Southerland’s work as it relates to Sun Ra, race, performance, and the avant-garde. But I want to highlight here the ways race plays into Kansas City avant-garde jazz, whether or not the participants I interviewed mentioned it. All of the performers I interviewed for this chapter are white, and none of them knew of black avant-garde jazz musicians in Kansas City. The city’s mainstream, swing- and/or bebop-based music scene is largely black, consisting of a majority of black musicians, black audiences, and support from largely black Kansas City cultural, political, and economic institutions; it has been this way for several decades. Other minorities have also participated in the mainstream jazz scene; for instance, Mike Ning, who immigrated to the US from China, has been a fixture in Kansas City bebop since the 1970’s. White musicians are also heavily

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Pinsent, "The Grand Scheme," 129.

represented in the mainstream jazz scene, but they are overrepresented in the avant-garde jazz scene.

By the 1960's in Kansas City, decades of political and economic maneuvering had bolstered segregation, especially through public school segregation (in defiance of *Brown v. Board*) and real estate block busting. Urban renewal programs and interstate construction in Kansas City had dislocated black residents in concentrated urban areas. Furthermore, after the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision banning segregated schools, the Missouri state government left it to the cities to decide how and which schools would be desegregated. The city designated Troost Ave., a major thoroughfare running north to south, as a school district boundary, east of which Kansas City's majority black schools (and thus most of its black residents) would be concentrated. The street became known as the "Troost Wall" because of its obvious segregating effects. By the early 1970's, every school east of Troost Ave. was more than 90 percent black. Busing programs sought to bring the city in compliance with desegregation, but black students had their own separate classrooms and generally did not mix with white students. The city elected its first African American member to the school board in 1968, but the board remained largely white through the 1970's; it continued to work against desegregation by claiming that neighborhood "unity, stability, and autonomy" needed to be preserved above all. As the city's overall population increased from the 1950's through the 1970's and segregation continued, black neighborhoods and schools east of Troost Ave. and especially in the southeastern quarter of the city, became more and more crowded. Kevin Fox Gotham describes the effects of segregation in Kansas City on racial ideology:

The fact that White schools tended to be underutilized while Black Schools were overcrowded helped reinforce in the minds of white residents that black schools were

inferior and substandard, a claim consonant with the negative stereotypes and prejudices of the day. These perceptions formed the basis of individual and collective decisions that led to white resistance to school integration and flight from southeast neighborhoods during the 1950's through the 1970's. Even more important, the racial transition of the southeast area was accompanied by widespread and rapid physical deterioration, disinvestment, and business flight.<sup>95</sup>

Realtors, supported by mortgage bankers and prominent real estate firms, marketed to whites in these “transitional neighborhoods,” encouraging them to move to the more “stable” all-white suburbs, while simultaneously refusing to sell homes west of Troost to black families.<sup>96</sup>

In this larger social context, the annual Kansas City Jazz Festival began in 1964. Given struggles over race and place in Kansas City, Darrell DeVore's rejection of the term “avant-garde” jazz, as I explored earlier, takes on new meanings. In this moment, DeVore seems to choose not to play the part of the hip jazz rebel, “taking it out” at the jazz festival in front of the squares. Instead he chooses to reassure his audience that his music might be challenging and new, but it would remain within dominant notions of “jazz.”

Concepts of hipness, struggles over definitions of jazz, and wider acceptance of the avant-garde are inextricably tied up with issues of race. Ingrid Monson has pointed out that “hipness” is itself a way for whites to position themselves as insiders in black culture and as rebels against dominant white culture. While hipness has its origins in the mostly white fans of mostly black bebop of the 1940's, it is rooted in the long history of minstrelsy in the United

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<sup>95</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 103.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-103.

States.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps DeVore did not want to position himself as elitist, or perhaps he thought aligning himself with the jazz avant-garde meant aligning himself with stereotypes of “dangerous” or “threatening” black males, stereotypes that have a long history but would have been in circulation through public struggles over the meanings of avant-garde jazz. In 1965, the year before the DeVore Trio’s performance, a debated raged in the pages of *Down Beat* magazine about the legitimacy of avant-garde jazz, politics, and race, set off in part by a series of articles and letters by Amiri Baraka and Archie Shepp. *Down Beat*’s more conservative and mainstream readers (and some columnists) wrote in to argue that politics had no place in music and that one ought to focus on “the music itself”—often code for white discomfort with particular performances of black masculinity in music, in defense of white privilege (although avant-garde jazz had its black and other minority detractors, too). By 1966, as Bernard Gendron points out, avant-garde jazz had been accepted into the larger jazz canon, at least by *Down Beat*’s editors.<sup>98</sup>

In Kansas City, unofficial housing and school segregation was firmly entrenched by the time by 1966; several fair housing groups had sprung up by 1964 and several states enacted fair housing legislation by 1966. At the same time, many whites saw civil rights demonstrations, the Watts Riots and other urban uprisings, and the founding of the Black Arts Movement in 1965 as threats to white privilege. White backlash came from Kansas and Missouri Real Estate Boards in 1964, who publicly declared opposition to fair housing legislation, and the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) began a public campaign in 1966 opposing fair housing. Despite this opposition, the Kansas City, MO, city council passed a fair housing ordinance in 1967, with significant white backlash from the local real estate industry continuing until the city

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<sup>97</sup> Ingrid T. Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3, Music Anthropologies and Music Histories (1995).

<sup>98</sup> Gendron, "After the October Revolution," 227.

enacted further fair housing legislation as part of the 1968 Civil Rights Act.<sup>99</sup> Struggles over fair housing and race could not have escaped the audiences at the Kansas City Jazz Festival. In this context, Darrell DeVore rejected the term “avant-garde” for his music, perhaps concerned about the reception of his music as “controversial” or too “weird.” Given these struggles, “too weird” might have also be seen as “too black.”

Youngstein, upon his arrival in Kansas City in 1962, remembers being shocked to hear that there were separate unions for black and white musicians in the City, and even more so that he heard it from a cab driver:

I’m talking to the cab driver who was black and everything and we got to talking, what do you do oh man I play bass, ba ba bah. And he says you know bro, there are two musicians unions here. And I about shit my pants and I says what? Because I came from New York, there was 802. And, he said yeah there’s one for you guys and one for us. And I was speechless. My jaw dropped. He said there’s the 34 and 627.<sup>100</sup>

Musicians unions began integrating in 1953, with the merger of Los Angeles black and white unions, but Kansas City’s unions resisted integration until the American Federation of Musicians forced them to merge in 1970.<sup>101</sup> Youngstein remembers playing in integrated bands with African American musicians, such as the Frank Smith trio, in which he was the only white performer (and in all white groups like Dave Zollar’s trio). Comically reversing the standard trope of the innocent country boy visiting the big city, he recalls playing with Smith to all black audiences: “And we got to playing these afterhours joints, and again I was like a naïve kid from

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<sup>99</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 124-6.

<sup>100</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

<sup>101</sup> Chuck Haddix, "Musicians Local No. 627 and the Mutual Musicians Foundation: The Cradle of Kansas City Jazz," (LaBudde Special Collections and Marr Sound Archives, University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, 2003).

New York, here I am playing at two, three in the morning in bowling alleys and whatnot over in Kansas.” What Youngstein remembers the most from these experiences was that the “all-black” audiences “accepted” him:

And what I found striking was that the majority of the black people that hired me liked me, and the majority of the places we played in that were otherwise all black, you know would yell out “yo bro, soul one out man, let’s hear it!” Because Frank played a lot of the Ramsey Lewis book, you know *The In Crowd* and all that kind of stuff, so I kind of, as far out as I was in my head as a player, I also learned how to give people what they want, so I learned to play all these very funky slides on the bass and that kind of thing, you know to get the fans to a fever pitch.<sup>102</sup>

We don’t know whether the audiences were all black, or precisely what acceptance entailed, besides Youngstein’s memory of the audience enjoying his bass playing. Such narratives of black “acceptance,” while unreliable as evidence of favorable reception, position the teller as receiving the mythical “pass” from communities of color, as being given special insider knowledge to a community that might have seemed very different to him. This kind of white entry into black culture is the mark of hipness, as pointed out above. But Youngstein’s narrative also highlights a belief in the importance of mastering a variety of musical genres, and then being able to intuit which styles a particular audience will want to hear. This story tells us that Youngstein wanted to be able to please black audiences, while also expressing a somewhat narrow view of what black audiences would appreciate—only soul jazz and “funky slides,” not the avant-garde techniques he already practiced.

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<sup>102</sup> Youngstein interview, 2012.

Youngstein did not know any black musicians in Kansas City who played avant-garde music in the 1960's, and he suggests that the segregated unions may have been to blame for that. "For all I know there may have been some avant stirrings in some other corner of this world here [in Kansas City]," he remembers, "but I certainly never came in contact with it, and truthfully, as many musicians as I knew, played with and hung out with, never got wind of anything going coming from any other area of the city."<sup>103</sup> Youngstein's spatial language here—"corner of this world," "other area of the city"—is also raced. It indicates that he was aware of the highly segregated social and musical worlds of Kansas City, the kind of spatial displacements and political disinvestment that Gotham describes. Youngstein was most likely aware of the great divide between the mostly white art community located around the UMKC conservatory and Kansas City Art Academy on one side of the "Troost Wall," and the remains of the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine District and crumbling neighborhoods on the other side.

When I asked Army Young about black participation in the Kansas City avant-garde in the 1970's especially, he noted that while some black musicians did play avant-garde in Kansas City, they did not seem to do so on a regular basis. "We had some black guys who hung with us and played with us," he remembered, "but their lives were a little more complex than ours, let's say, in certain ways." Young's use of "we" in this quote indicates that he saw the scene (or his band, at least) as white, with a few black musicians who "hung out." He mentioned one musician in particular, an alto saxophonist named James McReynolds, who had been active in R&B, funk, and soul bands in Kansas City, and who was open to playing avant-garde jazz. Young recalls a night when he, bassist John Nichols, and McReynolds "played free for hours" in McReynolds' mother's home. Young also suggests that most of the black musicians in town were older than he

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

and his other fellow avant-gardists, implying that the older musicians were more inclined to play older styles of jazz and were perhaps less interested in the “New Thing” or other avant styles at the time.<sup>104</sup>

Young’s comment that black musicians’ lives were “more complex” than white musicians’ lives also indicates that he was aware of his privilege as a white person in Kansas City. When I asked him to explain in what ways he thought the black musicians’ lives were “more complex,” he replied, “They were involved in certain unsavory situations, like for instance James McReynolds ended up getting blown away in a drive-by shooting.” In addition to being victims of increased urban violence in Kansas City’s predominantly black neighborhoods in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, working class black musicians also had to be more concerned with getting paid to play music. As Young notes, “They were used to being in R&B bands and making good money. And they weren’t as into just hanging around and playing all the time for free, you know?”<sup>105</sup> Working class black musicians relied on the steady pay that playing in more popular R&B bands would offer. Taking time to play informally for no pay would mean less income for black musicians; white musicians, in general, could most likely afford this privilege. As the scholarship on Kansas City and urban development has demonstrated, issues of space in the city are intricately and inextricably tied up with issues of race and class. Musicians are not excluded from these issues. While being an entertainer has historically offered African Americans a modicum of social mobility—greater than a manual laborer or domestic worker, for instance—they are still restricted by the historical forces that divide up cities according to race and class and reinforce those divides through social, political, and cultural practices.

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<sup>104</sup> Young interview,

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

The development of Kansas City avant-garde jazz was shaped by, and itself helped to shape, relationships along and across lines of race. In April 1968, the wave of black uprisings in US cities in the 1960's finally came to Kansas City, following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. The city school board would not allow schools to close for King's funeral, despite the fact that black church leaders in KANSAS CITY were holding their own memorial services and public viewings of King's funeral on television. On April 9, 1968, the day of King's funeral, black high school students at Lincoln, Manual, and Central High Schools, dissatisfied with this decision, walked out of their classrooms and began marching west on Truman Ave. toward City Hall to demand the mayor allow the schools to close. Police forces and mayor Ilus Davis met the protestors at the intersection of Truman and the Paseo, at Parade Park and still about four blocks east of Troost. One protestor, a white Episcopal priest named Rev. David K. Fly, remembers a black student asking the mayor why they had been stopped at this intersection. "Is it because Mr. Mayor, you want to keep the black problem in the black part of town?" the priest heard the student say. "Are you ashamed of us Mr. Mayor? Is that why you keep us out here with your policeman and the clubs and the gas? We want to find out. We want to go downtown."<sup>106</sup> The mayor tried to march with the group downtown, perhaps in an effort to keep the protest from getting out of hand, but the police grabbed him and did not let him march. This angered the students, and most of them ran onto the nearby interstate headed for City Hall.<sup>107</sup>

A line of police in riot gear had been set up along 12<sup>th</sup> St., near City Hall, to try to contain the protestors. Many of the protestors, however, passed up City Hall and went down 12<sup>th</sup> St., engaging in minor looting of the businesses there. The group at City Hall was addressed by the mayor and several members of the protestors themselves, but no agreements were reached. As

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<sup>106</sup> David K. Fly, *Reflections on the Kansas City of 1968*, (2006).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

the police line inched forward, some of the officers began throwing tear gas, and chaos erupted. This began two days of riots, looting, and violence, during which several hundred people were arrested and five, all African Americans, were killed.<sup>108</sup>

It was in this context that Young and other musicians in Kansas City began playing avant-garde jazz, occasionally with African American musicians but often without them. Kansas City's straight-ahead jazz scene was somewhat integrated, unlike other aspects of public life there, but, like those predominantly white schools where black students had their own classrooms, the jazz scene may not have been truly integrated everywhere. Young and others were aware that black musicians in Kansas City at this time were living lives that were "more complex" than whites' lives—living in decaying neighborhoods, attending declining and overcrowded schools, forced to live in redline districts, their demands and needs as African American citizens being ignored by the mostly white political and business leaders of their city, and the importance of their national leaders downplayed. The realities of these social lives did not make it easy for black and white musicians to play together; the fact that they did, even despite segregated musicians' unions, is to these musicians' credit. The fact that no such alliances were made in avant-garde jazz in Kansas City is unfortunate but not surprising.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the problem with most of the jazz histories that focus on Kansas City is that in their zeal to demonstrate the evolution of a sound and tell the stories of its heroes, they neglect the real social worlds in which those musicians lived and from which and among which the sounds of Kansas City jazz emanated. As Amber Clifford has noted in her critique of Driggs and Haddix's history, the authors "suggest that race itself was bounded in the city. In addition, by representing race in the city as 'self-contained' and 'an urbane center,'

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<sup>108</sup> Joel Paul Rhodes, "The Voice of Violence: Performative Violence as Protest, 1968-1970" (9970754, University of Missouri - Kansas City, 2000), 2-4.

the authors reterritorialized the Jazz District as a location where racially-segregated residents were happy in their enclosed and urbane enclave.”<sup>109</sup> Clifford’s dissertation is the first work to critique extant histories of Kansas City that gloss over or simplify the social conditions from which the music emerged. Further work on Kansas City’s jazz history ought to take into account Clifford’s critiques as well as Gotham’s detailed analysis of race and space in Kansas City.

## **Conclusion**

The history I tell here is primarily a local one that complicates the received ideas about Kansas City’s place in jazz history. Most of the musicians here, while never having the privilege of being a part of the jazz canon, do benefit in other ways, as mostly white, male, middle class, and heterosexual. In many ways, these privileges allowed them to create the music they did, exposing them to a wide variety of resources and to a bigger world of possibilities early in life than would be available to musicians in less privileged circumstances. Many of them acknowledge their privilege, especially when it comes to race; their contact with local black musicians at gigs led them to an awareness of the differences in their circumstances. This awareness allowed several of them to make alliances with black musicians that would not be very easy in other facets of life. Like the black musicians in Pendergast’s time, black musicians in Kansas City were severely limited but managed to thrive within those limits. Both black and white musicians, during and after Pendergast’s time, exercised what social and spatial mobility they had in different degrees, moving in and out of black and white social worlds as they negotiated changes in the city’s history and in the sounds they heard.

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<sup>109</sup> Amber R. Clifford, "Queering the Inferno: Space, Identity, and Kansas City's Jazz Scene" (University of Kansas, 2007), 92.

In this chapter, I have tried to write a “weird bodily history” of Kansas City jazz, demonstrating how alternative improvised musical practices, while possessing the potential for critique of dominant culture, may also simultaneously participate in or reinforce dominant culture. This approach is based on the assumption that music is a human practice, and therefore that musicians, like all humans, inhabit complex social worlds that both constrain them and allow opportunities for movement.

Part of the work of this chapter is to open up the Kansas City jazz canon to avant-garde performers and the sounds they made. I have tried to show how local scenes complicate the broader, generalized, sweeping claims of jazz historiography. I use musicians’ oral histories to complicate that broader history, adding to the infinitely diverse narratives of history; I also examine those oral histories themselves as they participate in the process of identity construction.

This weird bodily history listens for noise in both the sounds and historical narratives of Kansas City jazz. It pays attention to how sonic practices in Kansas City have complicated the widely circulated yet oversimplified notions of what Kansas City jazz ought to sound like. This requires listening for music that, in Ajay Heble’s evocative phrase, “lands on the wrong note.” This critical practice, Heble argues, requires “thinking about how dissonance—by which I mean sounds (and, more generally, cultural practices) that are ‘out of tune’ with orthodox habits of coherence and judgment—occasions a disturbance to naturalized orders of knowledge production.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, music that gets marginalized as “noise” might have profound implications for the contexts where it is found, as a critique of the structures that seek to silence it. Similarly, we can listen for noise in historical narratives—some of the more general “cultural practices” that Heble notes. To listen for noise in historical narrative is to hear voices that have not been

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<sup>110</sup> Ajay Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

heard in the dominant narratives in circulation in the era of repetition, narratives just as limiting as the repetition of sounds that are “appropriate” only to capitalism. Historical noise makes that narrative cacophonous, sustains the harmonic and narrative tension, showing how narratives that are represented as harmonious has always been discordant.

However, while noise might critique the dominant narrative, it may also end up reproducing or reinforcing it. Even if dissonance leads to critique or change, it does not achieve total freedom. Thinking about improvised practices (musical or otherwise) as acts of freedom within constraints, in Danielle Goldman’s conception, allows us to attend to both the critical and the normative. As Goldman argues, “the suggestion that one could escape confinement only to enter into or become aware of another set of strictures . . . is vital to understanding the political power of improvisation.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, improvised musical practices, despite the dominant narrative about them, do not inherently produce or lead to freedom, and neither is dissonance always purely or only dissidence. There is always another set of constraints to be discovered or established, and, as Attali argues, the era of repetition still dominates.

So if weird bodily history wants the many voices of jazz history to be heard, it also asks: What does it mean when the voices added to the history represent the dominant historical narrative, both of jazz and of wider life? For the white male musicians I interviewed for this chapter, simply participating in a small, local, undocumented scene does not erase their privilege in other areas of life. These musicians’ relationship to the jazz canon is complex—it supports them, their perspectives, their privilege, but it also leaves their individual activity out of its larger narratives. Weird bodily history seeks to highlight the contradictions in this positioning, listening for the ways these musicians’ oral histories belie their privilege even as they demonstrate their

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<sup>111</sup> Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 4.

support of and solidarity with minorities in the Kansas City jazz scene. This requires looking at these musicians as people living in the same social worlds that non-musicians live in, encountering the same difficulties, participating in the same struggles. It involves representing them as complex subjects who both benefit from privilege and are excluded from dominant jazz history, and who struggle to write themselves into that history by constructing identities through narratives of their musical activities in Kansas City.

Many of these same issues—struggles over historical representation, race, and genre—appear in the next chapter, when I examine current musical and social practices of Kansas City’s avant-garde jazz scene today. The sounds and spaces of this scene include a much wider array of creative practices in addition to musical improvisation—movement improvisation, costuming, sculpture—but the struggles continue, over meanings of “Kansas City jazz” and who gets represented in those meanings.

CHAPTER 2  
BODILY NOISES:  
IMPROVISATION AND THE SOUND OF SURPRISE

In Chapter One, I discussed the implications of the work of Jacques Attali for understanding the history of avant-garde jazz in Kansas City. In this chapter, I will apply some of Attali's work to studying Kansas City avant-garde practices in the present. I will argue that scholars studying music—especially improvisation—as culture that participates in power relations can refine their use of Attali's analysis to more adequately account not only for improvisation's potential to critique existing hierarchies but also to reproduce them. Deploying Attali's ideas as a methodology of musical analysis that is situated in several contexts can help us hear how sounds made in our own historical moment can point to better social relations even while they also simultaneously reproduce, reinforce, or represent current dominant hierarchies. This analysis has the effect of challenging current dominant discourse about what counts as jazz and what gets included in dominant jazz histories.

Attali's vision of the future in which people have “the right to make the free and revocable choice to interlink with another's code” in order to “compose one's life”<sup>1</sup> may also apply to interdisciplinary work, especially the ways that seemingly different epistemologies can combine in new ways to produce more flexible and lasting forms of analysis and critique. Here, I look at the ways literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's work, especially his concept of the carnivalesque, can be deployed in affinity with Attali to analyze music as culture. I will also examine some uses of Attali in improvisation studies as well as critiques of his use. I use Attali

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<sup>1</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 132.

as a tool to help focus my listening, to help me hear weird bodily noises in the present and in the past. This chapter will deal with one specific type of weird bodily noise—laughter—as it addresses the ways humor in jazz has been and continues to disrupt history and make both past and present noisy. Many Kansas City avant-garde artists of today use humor to bring the noise to jazz’s history and present. These irreverent, funny, iconoclastic, participatory, wild performances have the potential to reshuffle social relations but also to reproduce them. I will look closely at two examples in this chapter, the People’s Liberation Big Band of Greater Kansas City and the Top of the Bottoms Mardi Gras Parade. Both of these sets of performance use humor, especially carnivalesque humor in improvisation, to critique present social relations and suggest new social relations for the future, but they do so while also reproducing social hierarchies. In order to understand the complexities of these performances and their potential as social practices, we must also examine the historical contexts in which they occur.

### **When Landing on the Wrong Note Makes a Weird Bodily Noise**

As I mentioned in Chapter One, for Attali, the political economy of music in the era of repetition is dominated by a pervasive and totalizing music industry that controls what gets heard as “normal” or mainstream. Under these conditions, new sounds are not often heard; when they are, they are not accepted as appropriate for the culture. Thus domination is maintained by only by economic or market institutions, but by educational, governmental, and other cultural systems working together to silence difference and produce sameness. Therefore, just as the same sounds get repeated, circulated, and recirculated in the age of repetition, so do the same historical narratives. Repetition makes difficult the production of both alternative sounds and alternative histories by overwhelming the field of struggle with its oppressive and limiting sonic and

narrative sameness. At the same time, repetition's strict definitions of acceptable sounds also produce the conditions for noise; in order to define what counts as "music," institutions under repetition must also define its opposite—noise. Having been created and subsequently banished by repetition's institutions, noise returns to critique repetition, creating a field of constant struggle. For Attali, alternative sounds can herald the next era by challenging the distribution of power in its time and under its current economic system. For our own time, this appears as "the permanent affirmation of the right to be different . . . It is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one's own code and work."<sup>2</sup> Music under this emerging system would not be subject to the repetition of the market, gaining its importance as a consumer good; it would instead be the product of each individual's creativity and productive labor. Moreover, the dominant idea would be "the right to make the free and revocable choice to interlink with another's code;" this network of codes would in turn "compose one's life."<sup>3</sup> Thus the new system is called "composition."

We are not yet in the age of composition, but Attali points out some ways that musicians have attempted to "sound out" the new era, most notably in free jazz of the 1960's. "Free jazz," Attali notes, "was the first attempt to express in economic terms the refusal of the cultural alienation inherent in repetition, to use music to build a new culture."<sup>4</sup> The sounds free jazz musicians produced broke down barriers between high and low culture, and between popular and elite, thus threatening the dominance of repetition's neatly organized genre categories. But he also refers to the efforts of organizations like the Jazz Composers' Guild and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) to allow musicians to gain control over their

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 138.

own means of production. While these organizations may have succeed on the local level, they failed in the end, according to Attali, because their noise could not be heard on a larger scale.

Attali's vision of the next era being dominated by "the permanent affirmation of the right to be different" has been attractive to those scholars who are concerned with the political, social, and cultural contexts, causes, and effects of music. The notion of a future in which difference is celebrated is attractive to scholars who note the tenacity and slipperiness of oppressive norms like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ablism. Scholars who hear in music now that affirmation of difference in challenge to these norms are inspired by Attali's vision to champion advanced, creative musical practices, especially improvised ones, and to demonstrate how they herald a better future Attali. Indeed, many who use Attali's work argue that what he describes as "composition,"—interconnecting with others creatively and freely through the celebration of difference and noise—might best be labeled "improvisation."

Attali's work has most saliently been picked up by scholars of improvisation, many of them associated with the research project *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice* centered at the University of Guelph. Many of these scholars have taken up Attali's notion that music can prophesy a better future. The editors of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* (CSI), published by ICASP, established the program's link with Attali as well as how the program would expand on his work:

We agree with the pioneering insight of Jacques Attali that music exists to help us hear the sound of change. Broadly considered, improvisation, we contend, offers a salient point of entry for theorizing a broad range of pressing issues of cultural concern: power and resistance, the politics of identity formation, intercultural collaboration, intellectual property rights, social mobility, institutional constraints, multiculturalism, alternative

pedagogies, community development, human rights, hope, and new networks of social interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Thus “hearing the sound of change” in music means listening for ways that improvised music engages explicitly in oppositional politics, critical theory, and cultural dissidence, but how improvised musical practices might also offer models for new and better social relations.

ICASP’s director, Ajay Heble, articulated some of these same notions in his 2000 book *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*. Heble’s work is concerned largely with working out “a theory of musical dissonance as social practice.” This theory assumes that “oppositional politics takes as one of its salient manifestations an allegiance to forms of artistic practice that cannot be readily assimilated using dominant frameworks of assumption.” This linking of “musical dissonance with social and political dissidence” allows one “to hear in jazz’s sonic innovations a compelling critique of conventionally institutionalized systems of meaning and value.”<sup>6</sup> Thus “landing on the wrong note” is itself a critical practice engaged in cultural politics and on some level representing opposition in broader political spheres.

The assumption that oppositional politics necessarily aligns with “out” or “avant-garde” musical practices runs through Heble’s book and some of the work of ICASP and CSI/ECI. Several essays published in CSI since its inception approach Attali’s ideas from a range of disciplines, deploying Attali’s basic idea of that some music signals social change in a variety of

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<sup>5</sup> Ajay Heble, Ellen Waterman, and Frédérique Arroyas, “Welcome to Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique En Improvisation,” Editorial, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique en Improvisation* 1, no. 1 (2004), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/2/7>.

<sup>6</sup> Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 170-71.

ways.<sup>7</sup> Alan Stanbridge's essay traces jazz's path in American culture from social and sonic marginalization to mainstream institutionalization, concluding with a harshly worded critique of Attali's utopian vision and ICASP's reliance on his work. Stanbridge critiques ICASP's championing of free jazz as "romanticizing the margins," an elitist stance that forces political readings onto the music of oppressed groups, noting that Attali himself says that free jazz ultimately failed to create change. He argues that Attali's seeming unfamiliarity with free jazz and his unrealistic utopian vision are not a solid basis from which to engage the social implications of improvisation:

In a tiresome recycling of the worst of Adorno, the term 'Repetition' functions in Attali's text as a coded dismissal of what might be characterized as 'actually existing popular music,' and—in response to the apparent failure of free jazz and the spectre of 'Repetition'—Attali suggests the need for "a truly different system of organization[. . .] A music produced by each individual for himself, for pleasure outside of meaning, usage and exchange" (137): a somewhat shaky, specifically masculine, curiously apolitical, and rather hedonistically solipsistic foundation, perhaps, for a communitarian agenda of new social relations based on improvisatory music-making. Attali therefore represents an extremely problematic and, I would suggest, profoundly unhelpful guide in any progress toward 'new social relations' and the emergence of a 'truly new society.'<sup>8</sup>

Stanbridge notes his own skepticism of Attali, especially of using his "utopian" ideas as a basis for establishing the possibilities of improvisational music to create new social relations. I'd like

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Prouty, "The 'Finite' Art of Improvisation; Scott Thomson, "The Pedagogical Imperative of Musical Improvisation," *ibid.* 3, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/353/643>.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Stanbridge, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value," *ibid.* 4, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/361/960>.

to address several of Stanbridge's points here, in an effort to further explore Attali's usefulness to improvisation studies as well as the limits of that usefulness.

Stanbridge argues that Attali's "hedonistically solipsistic" vision of the future is not at all a proper basis on which to build a communitarian conception of music. However, Attali expands on this vision of community for the future later in the chapter on composition. He describes the ways that people would join with each other's codes under composition—"we create our own relation to the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create."<sup>9</sup> Such a vision is in part individualistic, in that individuals produce "their own" epistemologies, but those epistemologies then engage others' to form communities. Perhaps Attali's language here and elsewhere in the chapter emphasizes the individual a bit too much, but it is hardly solipsistic, for the individual is always connecting with others. He goes on: "Composition . . . is no longer a central network, an unavoidable monologue, becoming instead a real potential for relationship. It gives voice to the fact that rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies once the screens of the symbolic, usage and exchange are shattered."<sup>10</sup> Thus relationships among people become the primary mode of existence in composition, not the alienation of the marketplace. What Stanbridge critiques as "hedonistic," moreover, might also be described as Attali placing an importance on pleasure: "In composition. . . it is a question of taking pleasure [in the body]. That is what relationship tends toward. An exchange between bodies—through work, not through objects."<sup>11</sup> Here Attali champions the pleasure of productive work for oneself and in community with others. Furthermore, such pleasure can be found in making noise with others, which allows all people "to play for the other and by the other, to exchange the noises of bodies,

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<sup>9</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

to hear the noise of others in exchange for one's own, to create, in common, the code within which communication will take place . . . Any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order."<sup>12</sup> Would Stanbridge deny us the pleasure of making music together or engaging in satisfying work? I think not. But I would not call "hedonistic" a vision of a future in which human pleasure in work and in connection with other humans is valued, nor would I call such a system "solipsistic."

Perhaps Attali's vision is vague, but such can be said of all utopian visions, because they describe a time and place that does not exist but in the imagination. Such visions can help us to imagine how social relations might be better in the future, and then lead us to figure out how to change them. For instance, Paul Gilroy in *Against Race*: has argued for the necessity of utopian visions to be critical. The problem is that so many utopian visions offer a literally whitewashed vision of the future in which many of the hierarchies that rule our present remain, despite appeals to "multiculturalism." He sets the "unanimist fantasies" of surface multiculturalism that unproblematically celebrate globalization against the possibilities of "human mutuality and cosmopolitan democracy" for the future.<sup>13</sup> His concept of "planetary humanism" certainly has its utopian leanings, but he argues that while such thinking may tend toward idealism, it is possible to ground it in a politics that mobilizes "outside the patterns . . . of fortified nation-states and antagonistic ethnic groups" that tend to fabricate conflict as they attempt to solidify racialized identities.<sup>14</sup> His solution for this is the subversive possibilities of hybridity. He focuses on the cultures of "polyglot urban spaces" in the present that are characterized by hybridity and where "a new style of dissidence is being reproduced in which discrepant forms combine, conflict, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 41.

mutate in promiscuous, chaotic patterns.”<sup>15</sup> This leads him to an analysis of various aspects of black popular culture, from hip hop to Richard Wright’s fiction, to Sun Ra and George Clinton. Richard Wright argues that critiques of racial hierarchies are themselves “futuristic,” based on the Western notion of progress; if our present moment is the most advanced in history, the argument goes, then we must be heading toward a future in which we have progressed beyond racial ideologies. This critical stance also reminds us that “we can listen profitably to the futurology evident in black popular cultures,” because their critiques of race are themselves utopian visions.<sup>16</sup>

Fred Moten, in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, makes a similar argument for the importance of black culture as a both a critique of the present and vision of the future. The future that black culture envisions is one that is universal but does not rely on previously held notions of the universal that gloss over difference. Thus the potential for black culture to critique the present and prophesy the future is found in disruption, or “the break.” If convention relies on repetition (here he draws from Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, which relies on the repetition of norms and normative behavior), the break, a discontinuity in repetition, is that space between repetitions, a space that is, for Moten, “impossible to locate.”<sup>17</sup> While Moten does not evoke Attali here, his critique of repetition as a force of normativity seems to offer similar insights. The break is where political upheaval can be found, “in the nonlocatability of discontinuity.” This leads Moten to consider a “universalization of discontinuity, where discontinuity could be figured as ubiquitous minority, omnipresent

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 69.

queerness.”<sup>18</sup> It seems the break can be found everywhere, the always contentious or deconstructive element that troubles the whole or that problematizes the universal. While the break signals a better possible future, it is present here and now in black culture. In some ways, repetition is the context for the “break” as well as its rupture, just as for Attali some forms of black culture have been disruptive of repetition; but Attali argues that they all ultimately fail. This stance allows him to romanticize Jimi Hendrix as breaking from repetition’s predictable sounds but later to argue that his music “inspires dreams” but does not allow us to “use the musicians’ noise to compose one’s own order.”<sup>19</sup> It also leads him to demonstrate the ways that free jazz organizations like the AACM and the Jazz Composers Guild disrupted the repetition of the music industry, but only briefly and locally. Stanbridge’s critique of Attali’s “romanticization of the margins” would be greatly aided by a discussion of the ways Attali romanticizes particular marginalized groups, not just genres of music.

Another point of Stanbridge’s critique argues that Attali’s denigration of “repetition” is actually a thinly veiled “elitism” on the part of Attali against “actually existing popular music.” Indeed, Attali’s critique of popular music coupled with his celebration of free jazz can be read as a wholesale critique of any sound that relies heavily on repetition in lyrical or musical content. He argues that, in pop music lyrics, “the most rudimentary, flattest, most meaningless themes pass for successes if they are linked to a mundane preoccupation of the consumer or if they signify the spectacle of a personal involvement on the part of the singer.” One could argue that the “mundane preoccupations” and “personal involvement” which popular music presents might be serious business worth addressing, such as love relationships, social inequities, and other social problems of the moment that popular music has the ability to address. As George Lipsitz

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 137.

contends, “Popular music, like all forms of commercial culture from any era, registers change over time in important ways and serves as a vitally important repository for collective memory.”<sup>20</sup> This means that popular music does in fact address the “mundane,” but in a different sense: its lyrics speak of and to the “worldly” issues that its creators and listeners face.

Attali also critiques popular music’s sound, claiming that “the rhythms, of exceptional banality, are often not all that different from military rhythms.”<sup>21</sup> Here is where one wishes for some specifics in Attali’s argument—what music is he referring to? In what ways does it resemble “military rhythms”? Jazz historians claim military parade music as one of many influences on the development of early jazz, and Albert Ayler’s music often used martial rhythms and Sousa-like melodies from which to improvise. But more importantly, Attali argues that repetition in popular music masquerades as change, thus denying the possibility of real change. “Neither musically nor semantically,” Attali contends, “does pop music announce a world of change . . . Change occurs through the minor modification of a precedent. Each series is thus repeated, with slight modifications enabling it to parade as an innovation.”<sup>22</sup> This description (unintentionally) resembles Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s definition of the African American cultural practice called signifying, “repetition with a signal difference.”<sup>23</sup> But the distinction between the two approaches to repetition is important: while Attali argues that repetition forecloses difference, Gates contends that repetition makes difference possible. Ingrid Monson shows how Gates’ concept of signifying works in jazz improvisation specifically. As she points out, the element of “call and response” in much of jazz performance is but one

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<sup>20</sup> Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*, viii.

<sup>21</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 55.

iteration of signifying, “where it is a crucial component in the large-scale momentum of improvised performances.” Furthermore, she argues, call-and-response “is a fundamentally social, conversational, and dialogic way to organize musical performance” and highlights “the function of repetition in creating a participatory musical framework against which highly idiosyncratic and innovative improvisation can take place.”<sup>24</sup> Thus repetition in jazz makes both difference and innovation possible, for Monson; this is in direct opposition here to Attali’s idea of it.

Attali’s critique of popular music and his romanticization of black free jazz is problematic, of course, because much of repetitive popular American music is made or inspired by African Americans, too. To discount the repetitive rhythms of popular music is to discount the liberatory possibilities of blues, swing, R&B, rock, funk, hip hop, rara, and reggae, among other musical genres pioneered by African diasporic groups. So it is possible that, as Stanbridge claims, Attali falls back on a high art/low art binary, privileging the avant-garde as “high art” and anything with a groove as “low.” As Ingrid Monson has pointed out, “grooves and rhythmic feels have been important boundary markers in the debates over what should and should not be counted as jazz. The closer a rhythmic feel comes to an even duple subdivision of the beat, the more likely that some musicians and audiences will find that the music has left the realm of jazz and entered the sphere of rock and roll or contemporary funk.”<sup>25</sup> As Monson and others have noted, debates over what is and is not jazz are also debates over what music should be considered “high art” and what should be denigrated as “entertainment.” (As I show later in this chapter, humor also plays an important role in those same debates.) By devaluing repetition, Attali also

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<sup>24</sup> Ingrid T. Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 88-89.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-97.

discounts the critical possibilities of some repetitive music that relies on African-derived backbeats, polyrhythms, and grooves. He also discounts, as Monson points out, the impressive range of styles that most black musicians are capable of negotiating, within and without the borders of jazz.<sup>26</sup>

I agree with Stanbridge's implication here that such an analysis of popular music is not helpful in analyzing the complex social relations involved in the production and reception of music. Critiques of popular culture like Attali's are heavily influenced by Frankfurt School scholars like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who tried to demonstrate the ways that popular culture was simply another tool in the production of "false consciousness," and who valued avant-garde art as a vehicle of revolution. Heble appears to be aware of the dangers of this type of critique. Elsewhere, he critiques Adorno's take on jazz as well as his notion of the emancipatory value of "high art," noting that he does not wish to recuperate Adorno's championing of avant-garde high art in the cause of dissonance-as-dissidence. Instead, Heble argues that jazz complicates Adorno's high/mass culture divide; jazz artists like John Zorn have created a popular avant-garde that results in "a form of dissonant (and dissident) knowledge, a knowledge that's 'out of tune' with orthodox habits of thought and judgment even while it draws its power and force from the very logic it works to unsettle."<sup>27</sup> Of course, the noting of a "popular avant-garde" existed before Zorn. As Brian Smethurst as pointed out, members of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960's, basing their ideas in part on readings in Marx, argued for and created a similar concept, art that would appeal to a large audience of African Americans

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>27</sup> Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 186.

while also challenging them or raising consciousness.<sup>28</sup> Heble argues that jazz ought to be thought of as popular culture because “popular culture is not, as Adorno would have it, monolithic, [and] it can, in some contexts and in some ways . . . be emancipatory even as it may in other ways be reinforcing standardization and reasserting dominant models of knowledge production and consumption.”<sup>29</sup> Attali may not be quite as pessimistic as Stanbridge makes him seem about popular music’s potentials and limitations, and Heble demonstrates some useful ways that jazz specifically complicates this debate. Dismissing as “tiresome” Attali’s analysis of the structures that shape music production leaves out the possibility of using Attali’s analysis as a method of understanding the contexts in which popular music gets made and circulated. If we think of “repetition” as referring to the conditions under which popular music is created and circulated—especially the ways that interwoven economic, governmental, educational, and cultural institutions shape popular culture—then we can look at popular music as a symptom of those conditions that produce both repetition and noise.

Stanbridge is right, though, to mention that Attali himself noted free jazz’s demise. But in his discussion of free jazz (which Stanbridge points out does get several details wrong), Attali describes the ways repetition overpowers difference, rules it out, and banishes noise to the margins. For Attali, we are still in the age of repetition, so even if some music sounds out a possible future, that future has not yet arrived. As Attali explains regarding the demise of free jazz in the music industry: “The self-management of the repetitive is still repetitive; it is still tied to the same demands for the creation of value . . . Therefore, attempts to break away from mass music simply by challenging the system of record financing are condemned to failure, unless

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<sup>28</sup> James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 195.

they are able to transcend themselves.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, the AACM has survived and is now in its third generation of leadership. Even if “composition” has not yet been brought about on a mass scale, the AACM has continued to point to ways that it might.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the artists Attali champions have indeed received some degree of mainstream acceptance. As Stanbridge argues, this is not necessarily a bad thing for previously marginalized groups: “the mainstream can be a powerful position from which to speak” because it “has acted as an important enabling mechanism in pursuing their musical and cultural projects,” listing George Lewis, Anthony Braxton, Joëlle Léandre, and Anthony Davis as examples of marginalized groups who have achieved university positions.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not these university positions really count as “mainstream acceptance,” it is unclear what sort of “margins” Stanbridge intends here. In addition to the African Americans and woman he lists, he also cites white male avant-gardists Mark Dresser, Fred Frith, and Ray Anderson. While these other musicians may be part of the margins in terms of musical genres, they are hardly out of place in the overall demographics of the American university system. Stanbridge seems to downplay racial and gender margins in favor of margins based on musical genre.

Furthermore, the relative success of some of these musicians does not necessarily signal a change in overall social relations. The fact that some African American and female improvising musicians have achieved institutional and economic support does not mean that the US stops imprisoning African American men in much larger numbers than any other population, or that all working women in the US instantly make as much money as men doing the same job. What he fails to point out is that three of the musicians on his list—Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, and

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<sup>30</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*.

<sup>32</sup> Stanbridge, "From the Margins to the Mainstream."

Anthony Davis—would not have been considered intellectuals by mainstream white society in the US a generation ago or more and thus would not have been considered intellectually “capable” of university positions; non-whites continue to struggle to be considered intellectual in a wider sense today. The same goes for Joëlle Léandre, whose status as free improvising bass player hardly makes her mainstream, let alone mainstream in the university, where women have only in recent history achieved the same representation as men. Stanbridge mocks the “misty-eyed memories of 1960’s militancy” that romanticize musicians from the margins, but of course it was during that era that African Americans achieved university posts in greater numbers than before, many of them musicians like Archie Shepp and Sun Ra who were proponents of free improvisation. But apart from these examples, how many other black jazz musicians or female improvising musicians could one name with the same cultural capital? The list would be quite short compared to the list of white men with as much cultural capital. The successes of these musicians in the mainstream, though worthy of much celebration and discussion, should not be taken for evidence of larger, structural, societal change; racism, sexism, homophobia, classism still exist institutionally and individually. Analyses of potentials and limitations of improvisation need to take into account social relations in which improvisation is found, the history that shaped those relations and those sounds. Any consideration of what is mainstream and what is marginal needs to explore the range of meanings given to those terms at any moment for different groups of people; such an exploration will help to explain what’s at stake for artists who reject or accept those terms.

I agree with Stanbridge that we should adopt a view of improvised music that acknowledges “not only the positive socio-political potential of improvisatory creative practice,

but also its social and political limits.”<sup>33</sup> Such a view describes an overall attitude that I hope pervades this dissertation, one that strives to be both pragmatic and idealistic. However, this balanced view is not sufficient enough reason to wholly reject Attali’s implications nor the range of ways in which improvisation studies scholars use Attali’s ideas. To change social relations for the better, we must be able to imagine what that change would look like, to build creative visions and soundings of that future. Creating that vision also requires a full understanding of the contexts which shape those visions—what power relationships play out in our present dreams of a better future, and how the past shapes that present. Such soundings of the future can be found not only in creative improvised music itself but in scholarship that asks us to listen closely to that noise in its contexts. The best scholarship on improvisation leaves open the possibilities of both utopian and pragmatic impulses working together. Any approach to futuristic visions that moves too far toward wholesale dismissal or uncritical acceptance dulls the capability of that vision to be deployed as a critical method.

Attali holds his optimistic view of noise to sound out the future while simultaneously describing the oppressive systems currently in place that manage and control noise and thus social relations; these are the same systems that determine what gets heard as mainstream and marginal at particular times in history, a process that Stanbridge himself deftly describes. A full accounting of that process of mainstreaming, of moving from difference to sameness and back again, would require a comprehensive and complex analysis of power relations at each moment in history, a project too ambitious for any one scholar to take up in a single essay or monograph. Danielle Goldman’s analysis of improvised dance begins that project by focusing on the specificities of improvising bodies. In *I Want to Be Ready: Dance Improvisation as a Practice of*

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

*Freedom*, she argues: “A rigorous discussion of improvisation’s corporeality demands that one recognize the materiality, sensual complexity, and historical weight that exists within, and presses upon, bodies.”<sup>34</sup> While she believes that such materiality is easiest to observe in improvised collaborations between dance and music, it has wide applications for studying all bodies as situated in historical, affective, and relational contexts. Bodies move on and off the stage or bandstand, and those two spheres of performance are not separate, Goldman argues, and ought to be seen as mutually constitutive. “The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement,” she asserts, “often relate to aspects of one’s identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality.”<sup>35</sup> But it is worth paying critical attention to body movement in improvisation because, “a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move.”<sup>36</sup> Attali also connects improvisation with the body, a relationship that he claims is fully realized in the utopian age of composition: “To improvise, to compose, is thus related to the idea of the assumption of differences, of the rediscovery and blossoming of the body . . . Composition ties music to gesture, whose natural support it is; it plugs music into the noise of life and the body, whose movement it fuels.”<sup>37</sup> In composition, as we rediscover the body, we will also “assume” differences—that is, we will both take on or absorb differences into our bodies and recognize differences as given. So for Attali, bodily differences matter in future society, but instead of being subjected to social inequalities, they are the vehicle through which we connect with each other in improvised movement. While Attali

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<sup>34</sup> Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 56.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 142.

here describes how bodies might improvise together in the future, Goldman gives us a specific way to look at and listen to improvising bodies in the present and past.

I will offer more detailed examples of the ways improvisers “figure out how to move” with and against their material constraints in Chapter Four, when I discuss Mark Southerland’s improvised performances that use his “wearable horn sculptures.” But Goldman’s work has implications for the kinds of critical practices I’ve been discussing in this chapter so far, scholarship that addresses the complex power relations that shape creative musical practices and their reception in order to listen for a better future. To point out how systems continue to oppress, restrict, and limit freedom of noise and movement is necessarily to also show the intellect, creativity, spontaneity, and skill of those who manage to figure out how to move within those limits. Thus to show how music and musicians are still caught under repetition is also to show how these musicians work with that system, even if they have not yet ended up changing the system in a global way. It is also to show how our own models are caught up in those systems, enabling a certain amount of reflexivity toward our models.

Heble’s chapter on free jazz saxophonist Charles Gayle also problematizes his own dissonance-as-dissidence model. When confronted with Gayle’s monologues that express traditional Christian views condemning homosexuality and other “abominations” during Gayle’s free jazz performances, Heble acknowledges that his conception of dissonance as dissidence is called into question. “How,” Heble asks, “are we to understand open form music in the context of an artist who, by his own admission, is preaching not multiple truths, but rather a single truth?”<sup>38</sup> For Heble, the contradiction that Gayle seems to present offers scholars (the presumed “we”) the chance to examine our own assumptions about the meanings of improvisation and the

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<sup>38</sup> Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 210.

ethical assumptions behind those meanings. Gayle's case shows us that decisions to judge whether an aspect of any given performance is right or wrong "necessarily [have] to be made in the context of intersecting historical struggles for social justice, legitimacy, identity formation, and access to representation."<sup>39</sup> In other words, seeming contradictions offer scholars the chance to examine the ways that theoretical models and ethical stances are situated, caught up in largely unequal power relations in struggles over music's meaning.

Here Heble begins to question the limits of his approach. He seems to be asking: How is it possible that this music that I consider to be politically progressive is being performed by a man who makes socially conservative statements? This questioning problematizes Heble's assumption that free jazz necessarily represents social liberation in the first place. Furthermore, Heble's discomfort with the seeming disconnect between Gayle's performance and free jazz's liberatory potential assumes that all African American free jazz performers hold progressive political views that more or less line up with Heble's. Heble's assumptions here speak to prevalent notions in circulation about both black men and improvised music, assumptions that have long gone unquestioned. This is the very same trap of "romanticizing the margins" that Stanbridge critiques Heble and others for falling into. However, Heble's reflexivity about these assumptions in *Landing on the Wrong Note* helps to battle such romanticizing. It is evidence of Heble questioning and opening up his previously held notions of the inherent liberatory qualities of improvised music, as well as recognizing a broader range of performances of blackness than is generally accepted by mainstream white society. Gayle's blackness is a "weird" blackness in many respects; it is slippery, contradictory, elusive, and it confounds many theoretical models. Heble points out that Gayle's pronouncements against homosexuals and sex outside of marriage

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 214.

are completely at odds with his own sense of self-determination as a black man in the US. This contradiction only further highlights Gayle's weirdness—his politics and his music defy norms of blackness and of music, as well as what kinds of blackness are acceptable in improvised music. His opinions, despicable though they are, do exist, and point out the falsity of assumptions about improvisation's inherent freedom.

I'd like to build on Heble's work here and argue that the "problem" with Gayle's politics might represent an opening onto new, more complex models of understand music as culture. Such seeming contradictions should not be viewed as occasional problems to be dismissed, as they so often are, but as opportunities for self-reflexivity, as Heble does here. This approach helps us see how scholarship is always an ethical issue and always involved in power relations, and that political messages or content in music are always up for grabs and contestable. To look at improvised music as having the potential to be both emancipatory and oppressive is to accept its weirdness, its inability to fit into our preconceived models of political and cultural practice, and, sometimes to open ourselves to the disappointment that our favorite musical practices and musicians may not necessarily represent the progressive political views we wish them to have. Thus we can take critiques of Heble and Attali to heart and alter our analyses of music. My concept of "the weird" is in some ways an attempt to account for and analyze the complexity of identity that makes music both dominant and oppositional. It is also another way to explore the play of individual identities and larger social forces and institutions that affect each other, that work with and against each other.

I hope that weird bodily noises sheds some light on these complex relations, and sometimes does so in a humorous way. For, as the saying goes, these things are far too important to be taken seriously. In the rest of this chapter, I suggest that if we read jazz dissonance as

humor, we can listen for the ways that landing on the wrong note makes a weird bodily noise. To discuss humor and improvisation more closely, I will look at literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, because it closely resembles Attali's arguments about noise. Like music, humor can critique, poke fun, and suggest new "weird" ways of relating, Bakhtin argues. Like Attali, Bakhtin and his followers have been accused of romanticizing the margins and of propounding an unrealistic utopian model of culture. My work here will demonstrate the limits of that utopian thinking when applied to improvisation but also argue that, like Attali's work, it can be deployed as a methodology for analyzing the present in specific ways.

### **Sounds of Surprise: Humor and Improvisation in Kansas City**

One of the most common descriptions of jazz is that it is the "sound of surprise." The phrase is usually attributed to jazz critic Whitney Balliett,<sup>40</sup> but it has since become a widely used catch phrase to capture jazz's spontaneity. The phrase has also been used to describe laughter as a spontaneous reaction to humor, attributed, among others, to Ali Reza Farahnakian, improvisational comedian, actor, and founder of the People's Improv Theatre in New York City.<sup>41</sup> Certainly jazz and humor have much in common; one can witness musicians and audience members alike laughing at unexpected and spontaneous moments in improvised music. In a larger sense, we laugh when we are surprised by something that is unusual, out of place, or unexpected—that is, weird. Laughter is one reaction to encountering the weird. It is a bodily response that involves shaking, breathing heavily, doubling over, slapping the thigh, and a range

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<sup>40</sup> Whitney Balliett, *The Sound of Surprise: 46 Pieces on Jazz*, (New York: Dutton, 1959).

<sup>41</sup> Blythe Roberson, "David Foster Wallace and the Comedy Nerd," October 1, 2012. <http://splitsider.com/2012/10/david-foster-wallace-and-the-comedy-nerd/>.

of bodily noises from a small buzz between pursed lips to a full-bellied guffaw. And humor is itself related to the body; the word derives from the various moods thought to be influenced by the imbalance of bodily fluids or “humors” in ancient and medieval science. Laughter can be a sign of pleasure or delight, and it can mark the one who laughs as an insider who “gets the joke.” Laughter can also disrupt, mock, or deride, especially when it is in response to something intended to be serious. Thus improvisation and humor are very closely related to weird bodily noises.

Humor itself can be “weird” because it has several different effects or intentions—to provoke, to criticize, to entertain, to diminish or reduce or limit. It can critique the dominant way of thinking, but it most often seems to reproduce it; it is thus bound up in power relations. Humor can contribute to the formation of communities; an audience that laughs at a joke participates in a community and feels part of it at the moment of laughter. This means that humor can be used to critique the dominant, but it can also create a community of privilege, allowing the audience to feel safe in their privilege. Humor is noise because it can disrupt the moment, critique, call out. It can literally be noise—bodily noises are especially funny. But it can disrupt history, make history noisy, in Attali’s sense of the word, as much as it can reproduce dominant history and reinforce social hierarchies. The rest of this chapter will explore the weird ways jazz humor functions similarly to improvisation, as both critiquing and reproducing dominance.

The scholarship that considers humor’s integral role in jazz is sparse but growing. Much of it focuses on the critical and ironic aspects of jazz humor as stemming directly from African American performance practice and musical traditions elucidating the complex and subtle ways these performances can comment on African American social conditions, capitulate to the white mainstream, and challenge racism, sometimes simultaneously. Much of this work also notes that

jazz musicians' struggles for legitimacy in the white mainstream have often meant distancing themselves from notions of jazz as humorous entertainment in order to assert their serious artistic abilities and intellectual capability.<sup>42</sup> Like these scholars, Charles Hiroshi Garrett argues that analyzing humor's place in jazz means exploring the ways jazz often blurs the line between art and entertainment and highlights the discursive binary of serious art/humorous entertainment. Moreover, this exploration leads us to ask ourselves "whether we believe musical humor is a valid artistic strategy, whether humor and art can coexist."<sup>43</sup> Dismissing the possibility that humor is also art can also impair our critical functions as scholars: "If we conceive of art as a purely serious endeavor, if there is no room in jazz for humor, then both our definition of jazz and our method of critical inquiry will be equally curtailed."<sup>44</sup> Garrett argues that humor ought to be rescued from its current place as a sidebar in jazz studies to occupy a more central and critical position. To do so would mean expanding the current view that jazz humor represents or constitutes social critique or political action, because not all jazz humor necessarily works that way. Therefore, Garrett argues,

inquiries into jazz humor also need to account for elements of play, delight, pleasure, persuasion, and joy. What can humor tell us about carving out individual artistic space or building group solidarity, surviving in the world or temporarily escaping from it,

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, see Ralph Ellison, *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York: Modern Library, 2001); Monson, *Saying Something*; Robert G. O'Meally, "Checking Our Balances: Ellison on Armstrong's Humor," *boundary 2* 30, no. 2 (2003); Frank A. Salamone, *The Culture of Jazz: Jazz as Critical Culture*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Andrew Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

engaging in witty exchanges with a close circle of confidants or filling a large hall with peals of laughter?”<sup>45</sup>

All of these other possibilities for jazz humor are also social and involve power relations to some degree; they may not so overtly represent political action but deserve a critical eye all the same.

In part, humor’s function is to please the audience, to make them feel comfortable. Humor can gloss over social issues and make people feel good about their privilege. Jokes that take advantage of privilege and gloss over or justify issues of race, gender, sexuality, namely, power, can end up reinforcing the dominant in various ways. This is what I find compelling or humor, music, and art that uses both—they are complex enough to be both critical and reproducing of dominance at once, if we let them; they can both exceed and fall embarrassingly short of our expectations or hopes that they are subversive. Listening for humor in jazz leads to several questions: How does humor disrupt dominant jazz discourse? How do certain jazz performances complicate the art/entertainment, high/low, serious/humorous binaries that shape how we play and hear and see jazz? How do those funny performances in jazz also fall short of social critique or political comment? How do they disrupt disciplinary preconceptions about social critique or the functions of art and entertainment? How is laughter a weird bodily noise?

In Kansas City, the People’s Liberation Big Band of Greater Kansas City (PLBBGKC or simply PLBB) employs humor toward stretching the boundaries of and redefining jazz. Bandleader Brad Cox’s compositions especially use humor to this effect. The band’s music, composed by its various members (which varies in personnel and number, anywhere from 10 to 20, usually), features innovative arrangements and composing, a large amount of free playing, unconventional composing and playing techniques (conduction, reversed arrangements where the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 62.

single melody line is composed and the accompaniment is improvised by the rest of the band), and humor, both musical and spoken. The band performs on the first Sunday night of every month at the RecordBar, an indie and alternative rock club in the Westport neighborhood of Kansas City. They perform as part of the Alternative Jazz series, organized by jazz bassist Jeff Harshbarger, who presents contemporary and avant-garde jazz artists from across the city. Thus audiences at PLBB shows at the RecordBar most likely do not expect to hear a traditional big band playing swing classics in the style of Count Basie, or even a modern big band of intricate arrangements and virtuosic soloing, like in Maria Schneider's band. Instead, they go to this rock club to hear a fun, modern (or perhaps postmodern) take on improvised music. The music certainly swings sometimes, and the arrangements can be intricate and the soloists virtuosic, but overall atmosphere is different. The atmosphere at most of the PLBB's shows is one of joviality, camaraderie, and fun, due in part to Cox's dry wit on display in between pieces. This fun atmosphere perhaps suits a rock club more than a jazz club or concert hall, where, as Garrett has pointed out, "neither today's jazz musicians nor their audiences anticipate a night's worth of humor-filled entertainment. Instead, contemporary jazz is quite serious and professional."<sup>46</sup>

The PLBB's performances are usually organized around a theme, often corresponding to a close national or world holiday. On May 1, 2011, the theme was a celebration of May Day, or International Workers' Day. The music, and Cox's between-song banter, emphasized labor and the political economy of the music industry. Kansas City has several working big bands, from the swing-based Kansas City Jazz Orchestra to the more contemporary New Jazz Order Big Band, and plenty of audiences eager to hear big bands play all kinds of music, but none of the bands is a money-making enterprise. No big band playing in a jazz scene as small as Kansas

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 66.

City's could make a living wage for its members. This is significant given that, according to a recent study, most jazz musicians make a larger portion of their income on live performances.<sup>47</sup> These are issues that Cox highlighted throughout the performance. This was the first time the band used a web-based fundraising campaign at Kickstarter to fund the performance and pay the musicians. Cox reminded the audience that the \$5 cover charge normally collected at the show is enough to pay each member of the 17-member band only a very small wage, especially when the audience might number less than the musicians on stage. The fundraising campaign was launched in order to pay the band more for the performance (if not quite union scale, but close), but also to keep the price of admission low. As the band's fundraising webpage notes: "It is important to the social mission of The People's Liberation Big Band that we maintain a low worker-friendly ticket price."<sup>48</sup> This statement is both tongue-in-cheek and sincere; Cox would like to pay his band a living wage for this monthly gig, but the economics of the jazz scene in Kansas City (and many other places) does not allow it, especially for a big band. But he does not want to increase admission prices to do so, potentially excluding audience members who could not afford to pay more. He also understands that some of the band's audience may be willing to pay more, and he took advantage of the recent popularity of fundraising sites like Kickstarter to fund the show. These patrons who pay more will not likely need the "worker-friendly ticket price," but some of the audience members (including working musicians) might.

The central piece of the night was a suite of loose arrangements of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, a critique of the ruinous social realities under capitalism. Cox

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<sup>47</sup> Kristin Thomson and Jean Cook, "Artist Revenue Streams," accessed April 4, 2013. <http://money.futureofmusic.org/>.

<sup>48</sup> Brad Cox, "International Workers Day--the People's Liberation Big Band," accessed April 4, 2013. <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/744684837/international-workers-day-the-peoples-liberation-b>.

introduced this piece by mentioning how difficult and expensive it is to obtain scores or performing rights to this Brecht and Weill's work, so prohibitive, in fact, that Cox could not obtain final rights. Instead, his arrangements were impressions or remembrances of the original, with plenty of room for interpretation. The piece featured spoken word sections in which Cox dryly read from emails sent to and from Weill's publishing company, refusing the rights. The piece thus laid bare the political economics of musical performance, the labyrinthine demands of copyright, and the sometimes unfair and anti-performing practices of the music industry, but it did so in a lighthearted, fun way. The piece featured three singers, one was opera tenor Nathan Granner, dressed as a construction worker in a hardhat, neon yellow vest, and work boots. The theme of this particular performance also brought attention to musicians as laborers, working against discourses of improvisation as being "heady," jazz, especially avant-garde jazz, as being elitist, and musicians therefore making music "for the love of the music." Cox reminds us that musicians work hard, practice, deal with management, and get unfairly compensated in a world that does not consider music a "productive" work.

Such an argument insists that music, even ostensibly abstract avant-garde music—is a social practice and has social effects; other aspects of the performance reinforce this argument. The band's fundraising webpage claims that the low ticket prices "allow the workers of Kansas City easy access to the morale-building experimental jazz they need and love." Cox seems to be poking fun at the fact that "experimental jazz" could be considered "morale-building," lightheartedly carrying out the performance's labor-centered theme. Indeed, the PLBB's music does not in many ways resemble the communist worker anthems or Woody Guthrie sing-alongs that are usually considered "inspiring" to workers. But the performance also featured several short, spontaneously and collectively composed "workers anthems," each one performed in honor of

the few audience members who donated the most money to the band. This in itself is humorously contradictory, because only those who pay more can have their own individual workers anthem. The masses who pay regular price do not get the performance tailored to them. But of course Cox believes, one assumes, in the power of his music to make people feel better, and the fact that he organized a worker-centered show may in some part have the effect of building morale for workers. As Attali and others argue, improvisation that is experimental and avant-garde can be inspiring. Improvisation can demonstrate better ways to build societies, possible new futures that are more liberatory and cooperative and communal. Whether Cox intends ironic distance or heartfelt camaraderie or both, the effect is that the band's fun avant-garde jazz performance did in fact inspire audiences to donate and attend the performance.

Cox's piece combined improvisation, humor, original composition, and theatre, within the context of a jazz big band. By incorporating these other performances practices—and by doing so in a venue designed for small rock audiences in a city known for its own style of big band jazz—the PLBB makes dominant definitions of “jazz” noisy. Kansas City arts organizer Larry Kopitnik, who blogs under the name “kcjazzlark,” noted, “If you're thinking this jazz big band show must have been half crazy, well, that's part of the fun. And I think it's more than half.” His appreciation of the PLBB suggests audiences at their performances come expecting to hear “crazy jazz” that is “fun.” He also hails “the whimsy behind some of the best big band music you'll hear – best because of the outstanding talent taking that stage,” noting that this particular performance offered “special guests and features for jazz shows like none other you'll find around here.”<sup>49</sup> Lark was himself a member of the Kansas City Jazz Commission and has had a hand in trying to revitalize the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine Jazz district. He also manages the Kansas City

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<sup>49</sup> Larry Kopitnik, "In Lieu of 1000 Words: People's Liberation Big Band on International Workers Day," May 30, 2011. [http://kcjazzlark.blogspot.com/2011\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://kcjazzlark.blogspot.com/2011_05_01_archive.html).

Jazz Orchestra, a traditional Basie-style big band. But his comments here represent an openness to new forms of jazz and an appreciation of high quality musicianship, no matter what the genre. It is safe to say his readers are similar jazz listeners who might attend PLBB performances.

Kansas City's alternative weekly, *The Pitch*, voted the PLBB "Best Jazz Ensemble" in 2012, indicating they appeal to a wider audience. Another Kansas City jazz blog, Plastic Sax, written by Bill Brownlee, often praises the PLBB, even selecting it as the blog's "performer of the year" in 2011. One audience member and commenter at Plastic Sax, "Nigel Rivers," argues that PLBB's music is "actually quite accessible." But he took issue with the appropriateness of the venue: "If you continue to present the PLBB in the Record Bar, you'll continue to draw audiences numbering in the teens." He numbered himself among the faithful few, but thought both the bar and the band could do a better job promoting themselves. He also suggested the band change its appearance to fit in with other more appropriate venues: "The PLBB might want to look groomed and clean rather than living on skid row and then present their music in concert venues."<sup>50</sup> Rivers' comment here suggests that he expects a higher level of personal grooming than the band presents, but also, and more importantly, that PLBB's music is actually appropriate for a "concert venue." Note that he did not recommend a "jazz club." A member of PLBB, saxophonist and composer Peter Lawless, responded in the comments, stating that the PLBB does in fact play "concert venues" in Kansas City, but that the RecordBar shows are meant to be more "fun and adventurous." Here Lawless equates the humorous and "fun" presentation of a PLBB show with "adventurous" music, implying that the concerts—especially their collaborations with dancers—are less so. Perhaps he equates the avant-garde with humor and

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<sup>50</sup> Bill Brownlee, "The People's Liberation Big Band of Greater Kansas City: An Appreciation," June 4, 2011. <http://plasticsax.blogspot.com/2012/06/peoples-liberation-big-band-of-greater.html>.

musical experimentation, as well as with a certain relaxed appearance or attitude or presentation. Regardless, he also replies to this somewhat critical comment with typical PLBB humor: “P.S. As the most handsome and well-dressed member of the band ;) I must say I agree Nigel [*sic*] assessment of our look! Would it kill you guys to shave every once in a while?!?!?”<sup>51</sup>

The PLBB has also performed a humorous and heartfelt tribute to avant-garde composer John Cage. This performance acknowledged the composer’s debt to avant-garde and improvised musical practices today, by loosely interpreting his ideas and pieces for the PLBB. The entire performance highlighted the ways that avant-garde music can be fun, that its challenging sounds can be exciting, and that its performances can be looser and more participatory than what one might hear in a concert hall or in a jazz club. Like Don Ellis’ big band in the 1970’s, the PLBB performed Cage’s *4’33”*, consisting of three short movements of total silence. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Richard Youngstein notes that Ellis’ performance of this piece received wide and vocal audience disapproval. In contrast, the audience for the PLBB enjoyed this performance, laughing, tittering, and sitting in the silences as the bartenders talked, patrons continued to order drinks, and the cash register rang. The piece was conducted by Harshbarger—looking like musical humorist Peter Schickele in his long hair, beard, and dark suit—whose slightly over-exaggerated movements helped play up the comedy of the piece. The PLBB’s performance of *4’33”* was both a tribute to and send-up of Cage’s piece. While acknowledging Cage’s approach to sound, improvisation, chance, and chaos, it also critiqued the seriousness that sometimes accompanies avant-garde classical music and contemporary jazz. By acknowledging avant-garde classical music’s influence on jazz, it brought noise to jazz history, but did so through silence. The silence of *4’33”* made the laughter of the audience audible, momentarily bringing them into

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

the performance of the piece. Their performance on May Day also inspired the audience through their improvised “workers anthems” and highlighted labor and other economic issues jazz musicians face as performers, composers, and arrangers. In a larger sense, the band elicits the “pleasure, persuasion, and joy” that Garrett attributes to jazz humor.

### **Weird Bodily Noises at the Carnival**

As part of the PLBB’s tribute to John Cage, the band also performed what Cox says was a piece based on one of Cage’s ideas, the “Carnival of Music”—his notion that the ideal musical performance would consist of several different prepared pieces being played simultaneously. So the band left the stage and gathered in smaller groups dispersed throughout the audience, each playing their own pieces. Cox and Harshbarger played tangos on accordion and bass, the trumpeter played snatches of “Carnival of Venice,” and the drummer sang folk songs accompanying himself on the guitar. The whole piece ended as each group faded out (with no visible signals from Cox or anyone else), leaving only the four saxophonists to finish their Bach chorale. The result was a delightful, polyvocal, chaotic, and participatory performance that highlights another aspect of humor, the carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term “carnavalesque” to describe literature that privileges the chaotic and multi-voiced, but it may apply to music, too. It seems especially appropriate to some kinds of avant-garde musical practices, which emphasize many voices playing at once, often combined with movement, dance, parade, and the breaking down of barriers between audience and performer. Indeed Garrett has suggested that Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque is a more specific model for exploring the importance of humor in jazz. His model suggests how to conceptualize “the ways in which jazz humor creates different

possibilities, offers alternate forms of communication and collectivity, and helps us to negotiate new musical relationships with the world around us.”<sup>52</sup> Some jazz studies work has suggested how the carnivalesque applies to jazz, and I will expand that work while suggesting how Bakhtin’s carnival, combined with Attali’s concept of noise, offer ways to examine jazz performances that simultaneously suggest new, more equal notions of community and reproduce hierarchical ones.

Mikhail Bakhtin was a literary theorist writing in the first half of the twentieth century in the Soviet Union. As part of the influential “Russian Formalist” school of literary critics, he helped set the groundwork for structuralist (and eventually poststructuralist) theories. He advanced his theories of the “polyvocal” and “dialogic” aspects of literary texts in the late 1920’s by exploring the works of Dostoyevsky. In *The Problem of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, he argues that texts, rather than containing a single, authorial voice, are made up of several different voices speaking at once and in dialog with each other. His work questioned authorial intent and the dominance of intent-based readings of literary texts, instead suggesting a number of different readings are possible. He also claimed that literary works are in dialogue with other texts outside themselves, arguing for the importance of social and historical contexts of literary works.<sup>53</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, a further working out of his ideas of the chaos of multiple voices in literature and their social and historical meanings, was written in 1940 as a dissertation but not published until 1965. Bakhtin’s close examination of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais’ novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* allows Bakhtin to advance his theory of the

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<sup>52</sup> Garrett, "Humor of Jazz," 63.

<sup>53</sup> Lynne Pearce, "Bakhtin and the Dialogic Principle," in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

carnavalesque in literature—the polyvocal, chaotic, yet equal and free voices of the people as represented by the medieval carnival.<sup>54</sup> “Carnival time,” for Bakhtin, was a period of free, open, boundless communication and expression, a respite from or relaxing of the rigid social order that determined social behavior during “official time.” Carnival time is characterized by humor, joviality, excess, free movement, equality among classes of people, and most of all, laughter, while official time is much more regulated, serious, and authoritarian. Carnival consists of a total overturning of the usual rules, customs, and hierarchies of everyday, official life. For Bakhtin, “During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part.”<sup>55</sup> It is also a time when “the people . . . entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”<sup>56</sup> Bakhtin’s descriptions of the medieval carnival (and how Rabelais evokes them in his novel) are useful for their celebration of the upturning of the social order and the possibility of a polyvocal society that celebrates difference.

In distinguishing carnival from official celebrations of the state or the church, Bakhtin also succeeds in pointing out the workings of dominant or “official” culture. Official culture reproduces sameness, reinforces its own ostensibly natural order, and reworks a particular narrative of the past to do so. In medieval Europe, official celebrations

sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal; changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past. Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present . . . the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the

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<sup>54</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1968); François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, ed. M. A. Screech, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the contrast between carnival and official times was a struggle between different truths, one that emphasized change, death and renewal, dialogue, and freedom, and the other that argued for stability and order. Most importantly for Bakhtin, this emphasis on stability and indisputable truth “is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it.” Thus the humor and chaos of carnival is opposed to, and in a sense critiques, the sober, ordered universe of official time.

Bakhtin’s emphasis on the body has also drawn scholars’ attention to his work. His notion of “grotesque realism” in Rabelais’ work celebrates the body and associates it with the earth, as opposed to the cerebral activity of the mind: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their dissoluble unity.”<sup>58</sup> Thus the body for Bakhtin is a site of the real, of positivity, and of the earth, and is in direct opposition to the mind, the spiritual, and the abstract. Here Bakhtin’s argument relies on Descartes’ mind/body divide but reverses it, privileging the body as the site of “real existence” rather than the mind.

Jazz studies scholar David Ake has addressed some of the ways the Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque apply to jazz.. He points out that the medieval European carnivals Bakhtin describes have several things in common with jazz: “laughter; an embrace of popular culture; an emphasis on the public or crowd rather than the private or individual; irreverence toward

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

anything deemed sacred, serious, or timeless; and the larger-than-life manner of presentation.”<sup>59</sup> He also notes the important distinction that jazz is based largely on African American culture, and thus the similarities between it and European carnival are in “attitude and aesthetics,” not in actual practices.<sup>60</sup> Despite these similarities, he notes that most jazz today privileges seriousness over humor and relies on strict professionalism that separates audience and performer. Official jazz discourse today is pervaded by seriousness, respectability, and elevated language, from scholarly work on jazz, to commercial jazz publications, to government resolutions.<sup>61</sup> Ake, like other scholars writing on jazz and humor, rightly points out that jazz’s relationships with culturally resilient binaries like high/low, mind/body, serious/humorous, and art/entertainment are fraught with power relations involving race, gender, sexuality, and class. While he does not wish to suggest that jazz does not require serious attention, practice, and intellectual and physical work, he does argue that such work does not separate jazz from any other form of art, entertainment, or sport, and should not be grounds, as it so often is, for jazz musicians and audiences alike to argue that jazz is “the exclusive province of the urbane and erudite.”<sup>62</sup>

Ake argues that Sex Mob’s name and visual material evoke the carnivalesque, through references to copulation, drunkenness, and chaos. Their avant-garde sounds recall bodily noises, their repertoire privileges the popular over the rarified, and their loud, largely groove-based music encourages active dancing over passive listening. The brand of humor they use, for Ake, is “participatory” rather than “performative;” it does not set itself above others in order to laugh at them, but instead includes everyone in on the joke. Participatory humor is about the failings of

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<sup>59</sup> David Ake, *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time since Bebop*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 58.

all human beings, Ake argues; it laughs with people rather than at them.<sup>63</sup> Here Ake's argument becomes somewhat unsteady and seems to rely a bit too heavily on Bakhtin's clear dichotomy of carnival/official time, especially as he attempts to apply it to Sex Mob. For instance, he offers the band's loose and irreverent version of the 1990's dance hit "Macarena" by Los Del Rio as an example of Sex Mob's participatory humor. While the original version was a very popular song, it was also one that certain groups loved to hate, deride, or laugh at for being too simplistic. It is possible that Sex Mob's version of this might be pointing and rolling its eyes at the original and fans of it, like any number of "hepcats" making fun of "squares," as in "performative" humor. It is possible that Sex Mob fans (and members of the band, for that matter), enjoy their version of the song precisely because it makes fun of the original, not because they sincerely and unironically enjoyed the original song.

Either way, none of the music, dance, comedy, or other performances Ake or others like myself here discuss are technically carnivals; Bakhtin says that carnivals are participatory and have no audiences that are separate from the performers. As Bakhtin notes, "Carnival does not know footlights . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."<sup>64</sup> Most jazz performers today participate in varying degrees in the market, in capitalism, and in the division of labor between audience and performer, simply because they are doing so in the West in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Ake acknowledges that participation in carnival as Bakhtin describes it is historically contingent and specific to medieval Europe, so looking for the "carnavalesque" in jazz today means analyzing how some performances might resemble Bakhtin's carnival in "attitude and aesthetic."

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>64</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

Thus it can be helpful to look, as Ake does, for the carnivalesque in the marketplace or in the official, to look for ways that carnivalesque performances interact with and critique official discourses, histories, and public rituals as Ake does. It is also possible to look for the ways that carnival does not extend everywhere, is not total or permanent or universal, and instead to highlight carnival's complexity, contingency, and constructedness. This would mean showing how the carnivalesque also participates in complex power struggles and is implicated in both dominance and subversion. Ake does so when he analyzes the racial stakes of Sex Mob's attempts to reassociate jazz with sexuality: "As white musicians, the members of Sex Mob have never faced the complicated, sometimes degrading, and even physically dangerous conflation of music, blackness, and hypersexuality in the public imagination, and perhaps they have not considered the potential discomfort or animosity their group's name might trigger in some listeners, performers, or other jazz participants."<sup>65</sup> Ake here identifies the racial stakes in attempting to "bring the sexy thing back into instrumental music" as the band itself claims. I would add that the name "Sex Mob" also evokes sexual violence, and the fact that all the members of the band are men might conjure up notions of group violence against women. This is perhaps another issue the band has the privilege not to notice.

This use of Bakhtin's carnival complicates his theory somewhat, because he argues that carnival is universal and applies to nearly everyone. However, he also reminds us that carnival is temporary, that official time always returns. The return of official time for Bakhtin means that carnival time has an end. Indeed, some have argued that carnival allows the working classes to release their anger at their rulers in an environment that ultimately does not threaten their

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<sup>65</sup> Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 60.

power.<sup>66</sup> This would seem to suggest a Marxist reading of popular culture like the ones Stanbridge warns against, the dismissive view popular culture is ultimately another way of spreading false consciousness among the masses. If we take Bakhtin and Attali together, however, we can look at the ways that carnival time heralds change in the future; even if the oppression of everyday official time returns, the carnival has perhaps pointed to better ways of existing and more equal social relations. Perhaps carnival time has changed official time, even slightly. Just as noise in the present can sound out the future for Attali, so can carnival play out the future. In neither of these analyses has that better future arrived yet; instead, the task is to look for it now. So it might be worth looking for ways that carnival exists during official time, which Bakhtin himself suggests is precisely the role of the fool in official time.<sup>67</sup> This seems to be in the spirit of what Ake does here with Sex Mob, and what I hope to show with some Kansas City avant-garde jazz.

My concept of weird bodily noises takes Bakhtin's concept of carnival a bit further than Ake to analyze jazz in three areas—the potential of carnival to critique the official; the different uses of time in carnival and official time, especially in relation to the past; and a focus on the body, through Bakhtin's notion of "grotesque realism." Furthermore, Attali's notion of noise will help to amplify my use of Bakhtin's carnival in analyzing jazz and other improvised practices. Like Bakhtin and Ake, I believe that some creative practices that use aspects of the carnival should be examined for their potential to critique "normal" or official time, rather than dismissed as hedonistic, individualistic, or simplistically contrarian. However, I also want to critique the official/carnival binary that Bakhtin relies heavily on. I argue that most creative practices show

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<sup>66</sup> Pearce, "Bakhtin and the Dialogic Principle," 230-31.

<sup>67</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.

us that the carnival is never purely carnivalesque, and the official is never completely dominant. Most creative practices are “weird,” as I see it—they are not usually completely subversive nor completely dominant—because they are created by humans, whose intersecting identities are themselves complex and situated within shifting and unequal power relations. It’s a weird world, in other words, and we should acknowledge that our pet critical jazz projects are also weird to us—that is, they do not fit neatly into our theoretical constructs or our desires for them to be pure, authentic, or totally free of ethical considerations. Ake does acknowledge this to some extent as I noted above in his considerations of Sex Mob and race, but his analysis returns, seemingly for the sake of argumentative or rhetorical closure, to the importance of the band’s resuscitation of jazz’s association with the body and sexuality. This closure ends up suppressing a critique of the band based on race (and on gender, as I mentioned) in favor of Ake’s argument for their critique of official jazz discourse in other ways. Ultimately, Ake forecloses on Sex Mob’s weirdness.

I want to emphasize that for Bakhtin, the carnival ends eventually, and official order is restored. Perhaps the carnival has changed official order slightly or has looked forward to a time when the current oppressive official order might be abolished, but domination still returns. Furthermore, for Bakhtin, carnival includes a relaxing of rules of decorum and politeness; one wonders about the effects of such lawlessness on women, for instance. Bakhtin’s claims for carnival’s universality and its status as the voice of the “people”—that is, his class analysis of carnival—could be infused with intersectional analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and ability that retain carnival’s critical edge.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> So far, the most work has been in gender analyses of Bakhtin and comedy. See Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994); Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Amy E.

Second, Bakhtin's analysis of the ways the official and carnival discourse appropriate time through historical narrative is another aspect important to my concept of weird bodily noises. Bakhtin argues that the "official feast" reinforces the "existing hierarchy" through promotion of particular truths as "indisputable and eternal" by "using the past to consecrate the present."<sup>69</sup> As I mention in Chapter One, dominant jazz discourses construct a particular narrative of jazz history that attempts to justify the status quo and makes domination seem "natural," in the same way that dominant jazz discourse does. Ake demonstrates how carnivalesque music works against official truths and historical narratives that limit what gets heard as "jazz." He and the other scholars mentioned above demonstrate the ways that humor and jazz serves to complicate official histories, how it laughs at the seriousness of dominant jazz narratives. One must be clear about both the official history and alternative histories, as well as the ways they shape and are shaped by each other, in order to account for both fully.

Third, Bakhtin's focus on the body as both a text to be read and a mode of experience has implications for jazz studies. Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque realism" highlights the body as messy, expansive, incomplete, and associated with the earth, especially in the ways that Rabelais describes bodily functions through out his text. But Bakhtin also demonstrates how carnival time was experienced bodily—it was a time of freedom of expression, in which people could move and speak more freely than in other times, and in which the laws and practices that regulated their bodies for work and prayer relaxed or were ignored. Ake points out the ways that the "lower strata" of the body, associated with sex, procreation, and defecation, is important to jazz humor on and off the bandstand, as well as the ways that avant-garde sounds may represent

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Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9.

bodily noises. As many of the Kansas City performers I interviewed for this project argued, denying jazz's relation to human sexuality would entail forgetting its history, to limit its audience, and to diminish its affective power. Ake has already pointed out at least one way that playing up jazz's association with sex can be problematic when considering racial analyses of culture, and I mentioned above how that association might also be problematic for women. I will delve into the complex issues of embodiment, race and gender in jazz in Chapters Three and Four, but I will say here that analyses of the carnivalesque body in jazz need not be limited to sexuality and bodily functions. Exploring embodiment in jazz can mean looking at the improvised interactions of musicians and dancers, discussing music as a physical act that shapes and is shaped by musicians' bodies, and examining how dancers and other performers who do not sing or play an instrument also participate bodily in jazz. All of these questions can help understand bodies in jazz that are raced, gendered, and sexualized, and how those bodies move and are moved as they participate in power struggles over jazz's meanings and its history.

Bakhtin insists that scholars should not discuss carnival outside the context of the times and social relations in which it took place; attempting to modernize the idea of the carnival, to evaluate it in the modern era or apply its principles to something modern is to misunderstand it. Both Ake and I willfully misread Bakhtin, then; we seem to see something about his concept of the "carnavalesque" that is worth expanding on, beyond Rabelais' work or other medieval and Renaissance literature. As with Attali, I think it is possible to glean a Bakhtinian method to be deployed on a variety of "texts" that helps scholars ask how power is complicit in the creation and policing of creative work, in what contexts those works exist, and how they are bound up in issues of class, embodiment, history, and dominant narratives. I want to apply the carnivalesque to sound in addition to the visual and verbal texts Bakhtin analyzes. I suspect that when Bakhtin

conjures up images of carnival time in medieval Europe, he also hears its noise in his head. He certainly hears its laughter, so I suspect that he hears other noise, too.

In fact, applying Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to sound may not be as difficult as it seems, especially if it is put together with Attali's approach to sound. The cover of Attali's *Noise* features a detail from a painting called *Carnival's Quarrel with Lent* by Dutch Renaissance painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Painted in 1559, the work depicts a lively and chaotic scene of revelry during a carnival in a small town square, situated between a church darkly looming on the right and the town inn overflowing with drunkards on the left. The painting and its title bring out the sense of struggle between the two sides and highlights the ways that carnival and official time participate in a power struggle that involves nearly everyone. Attali sees the painting as a representation of "a battle between two fundamental political strategies, two antagonistic cultural ideological organizations: Festival, whose aim is to make everyone's misfortune tolerable through the derisory designation of a god to sacrifice; Austerity, whose aim is to make the alienation of everyday life bearable through the promise of eternity—the Scapegoat and Penitence. Noise and Silence."<sup>70</sup>

Attali's interpretation of the painting offers a way to hear its noise and the struggles noise is engaged in: "natural noise, noise of work and play, music, laughs, complaints, murmurs . . . Brueghel saw the profound identity between noises and differences, between silence and anonymity. He announces the battle between the two fundamental types of sociality: the Norm and the Festival."<sup>71</sup> Thus Brueghel's painting is a depiction of the power struggles into which noise figures so heavily in his day, struggles that for Attali are bound up in the centuries-long process of the ordering of noise into music. *Carnival's Quarrel with Lent* is a depiction of sound

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<sup>70</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 21-22.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

in social struggles, as it appears as noise and as it is ordered into music, a struggle that Attali claims is prophesied in the painting. “Breughel, in his meditation on the possible forms of noise,” Attali asserts, “could not have failed to hear how they hinge on systems of power . . . Brueghel cries out that music, and all noises in general, are stakes in games of power.”<sup>72</sup>

The painting also suggests the ways these ostensibly binary opposites are actually mutually constitutive: they exist in the same scene, in the same town, in the same public square, with the same citizens attending both. Rather than elucidating a dichotomous universe as a constant battle between noise and silence, carnival and official time, light and dark, or other binaristic opposites, I would like to use Attali and Bakhtin to look for ways that the carnival creeps in to official time (through the fool or clown for instance) or for how official time can double back on carnival and silence its noise. Just as Bakhtin points out that the carnival ends and official time returns, Attali reminds us that we are still in the age of repetition, and that its structures are pervasive. But in a grander sense, Attali also reminds us of the larger, slower shifts in history, the sea change that is difficult to see from our own vantage point. But we can listen for that change to come in the music of today, and we can look for in the carnivals of our current time. But if carnival is also a bout renewal, it can thus herald the future—carnival time can give us a glimpse of the noise of the future, the way things might be better, after the current order shifts to something else, just as noise can prophesy change.

More importantly, both Bakhtin and Attali are concerned with the body and see it as a site of resistance and positivity. Bakhtin also warns us not to consider his discussion of the body as having anything to do with modernity’s concept of the body of organs, functioning together as a complete whole. Instead, he says the body in grotesque realism is “unfinished, outgrows itself,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

transgresses its own limits.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he argues: “The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements.”<sup>74</sup> Bakhtin’s emphasis on the body highlights the ways bodies connect with each other and the rest of the world, rather than to consider them as discrete individuals that are divided, ruled, and disciplined by institutions like the state and the church. Both Attali and Bakhtin tend to romanticize the body as the site of authenticity, groundedness, communication, and freedom. Their focus on the liberatory potential of the body could be tempered with an understanding of the ways the body participates in power struggles and a focus on specific bodies in particular contexts in order to see how bodies can be both sites and agents of domination, especially according to race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class. In other words, we can “flesh out” the implications of Attali’s and Bakhtin’s ideas in analyzes of jazz and embodiment. One way to do so is to pay attention to movement—the ways bodies move in relation to each other and the spaces through which they move. The following analysis brings this concept to bear on the 2012 underground Mardi Gras street parade in Kansas City, showing how these sounding bodies move through particular spaces at a particular moment in history.

### **Keep that Lane Open!: Carnival Time in Kansas City**

In a small, densely packed back room of the art gallery in the Crossroads Arts district of Kansas City, local Afro-funk band Hearts of Darkness played a vibrant, throbbing set of songs as bodies pulsed, jumped, and surged with the music. Both band and audience were garishly costumed, ranging from sequined prom gowns and suits embellished with feathers and epaulets

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<sup>73</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

to simple dime-store masks in purple, green, and gold. Outside in the alley, the members of various “krewes” put the final touches on their floats—homemade, eclectically and erratically decorated, none of them bigger than a small-sized sedan. One float consisted of a cart which was pulled by various members of the krewe; the back of the cart was dominated by an Easter Island-like face which frowned at anyone marching behind. Another float, a small wooden hut on the back of a flatbed truck, featured photos and paintings of various political and religious figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, and Mahatma Gandhi. As the band’s set ended, I emerged sweaty from the back room; I stood on the sidewalk outside the gallery taking photographs and video as the floats and marchers poured out of the alley and on to 18<sup>th</sup> St. to start the parade. Members of Hearts of Darkness joined their krewe under a banner emblazoned with the krewe’s name—“Top of the Bottoms”—and the slogan, “Always for Pleasure.” I soon realized that nearly everyone present would be participating in the parade; there would be no audience. So I joined the marchers in the street, switching audio, video, and photographic recording devices in and out of my pockets as I walked, sang, and danced with the crowd. The parade proceeded east on 18<sup>th</sup> St., with at least 100 participants, many in costume, many with instruments—trumpets, saxophones, guitars, bass and snare drums, washboard, flutes, and other hand percussion. Informally organized versions of “Iko Iko” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” played up and down the loose column of people, led mostly by the drummers in the Top of the Bottoms krewe. Parade leaders, dressed in bright colors and carrying feathered fans, occasionally herded participants into the right lane of the street so that cars could pass by on the left. Their cries of “Keep that lane open!” helped warn paraders when cars were trying to pass. Out in front of the whole throng, an African American woman in her 20’s performed a version of the cakewalk, bouncing, crouching low and walking, swerving and sliding in front of the group.

She wore black jeans, sneakers, a large gray men's sport coat, and a black baseball hat turned sideways. Marchers were mostly young women and men (in their 20's and 30's, but a few in their 40's and 50's, and some children) and a mix of whites and people of color, with the white participants predominating.

There was no police escort or official presence of any kind to protect or harass the parade, as far as I could tell. The presence of open liquor containers and marijuana smoke seemed to confirm the sense that police would not be involved. The parade marched down a mostly deserted street, near empty warehouses and office buildings closed for the day, and past the occasional art gallery or bar. When the group reached the overpass of US Highway 71, a cheer went up and the musicians played louder, taking advantage of the cathedral-like acoustics under the cement and steel structure to amplify their sound. The noise echoed as the parade crossed Troost Ave. and passed by empty parking lots, a small park, car dealerships, and the functional-looking cement structure of the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority. Another cheer went up as we neared the intersection of 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine, the historic Kansas City Jazz District and the parade's terminus at the jazz club The Blue Room. The marchers pooled in front of the Blue Room as we squeezed into the front door of the club one at a time. Inside, the marchers filled the club to near capacity and the instrumentalists took the stage, joining with the Serendipity Brass Band, whose set was already in progress.

This underground Mardi Gras parade took place on the evening of Tuesday, February 21, 2012. I would like to use this example to test the implications of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque on improvised performance practices, as well as to suggest one possible method for studying movement, sound, and social relations. Many of the participants in the parade are involved in various creative practices in Kansas City, as visual artists, gallery owners, dancers,

performance artists, costumers, and musicians playing jazz, rock, Afro-funk, hip hop, and other improvised music. They create their art in the context of the social relations of their time, a history of uneven real estate development, institutional racism, de facto segregation, poverty, exploitation, and ever increasing spatial, cultural, and ideological divides between whites and non-whites in Kansas City. The participants were born between 1970 and 1990, roughly, and they would have grown up with spatial segregation based on race in Kansas City (or other cities across the US) as an established reality, a background fact to their lives. The history of that segregation shaped the relationships, sound, and movement these artists participate in.

In 1968, in response to the demands of fair housing movements all over the US, reports criticizing the FHA's failure to help poor Americans find adequate housing, and critiques that the private real estate industry continued its racist and elitist practices, Congress passed the Housing Act to enable low-income families to purchase new or existing units. As Kevin Fox Gotham's comprehensive study of race and real estate in Kansas City points out, between 1969 and 1974, most of the funds the city received from the federal government went toward building new units in suburban areas. Nearly all of the money for existing housing went to a small area east of Troost Avenue between 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Streets. The result was rapid racial transition in these areas; for instance, the African American population at Troost Elementary School grew from 42 percent to 87 percent in the course of one year. Section 235 of the Housing Act enabled opportunistic real estate developers to sell houses with only cosmetic rehabilitation to low-income buyers, who could not afford to pay for the subsequent repairs and structural upgrades these houses needed. To counteract the effects of the Housing Act, some neighborhood associations recognized the value of Kansas City's diverse neighborhoods and encouraged families, especially white families, to remain in areas of higher diversity instead of selling their

inner city homes and moving to the suburbs in a panic. By 1973, enough local and regional action had been taken against unjust real estate practices across the country to force the US government to place a moratorium on all federally subsidized housing programs. Without the backing of government loans, real estate developers and brokers stopped working in inner city neighborhoods altogether.<sup>75</sup> This meant that in Kansas City, Gotham notes, “private lending agencies ceased making home mortgage money available to residents living east of Troost Avenue, thereby redlining entire neighborhoods and launching a vicious wave of disinvestment and physical deterioration that continues to this day.”<sup>76</sup>

Federal policies since the 1970’s have not helped the situation. As Gotham notes, the 1980’s and 1990’s saw a “two-decade long transformation of federal housing policy that has included privatizing federally supported mortgage markets, partially privatizing remaining public housing projects while unilaterally demolishing others, and, most important, drastically reducing federal spending on housing.”<sup>77</sup> While these practices were not explicitly racist, they resulted in many more black families being concentrated in areas east of Troost Avenue, and more and more white families moving to the Kansas City suburbs in recent decades. Gotham cites sociological studies on race and racism to account for institutional racist practices; scholars like Michael Omi and Howard Winant in the 1990’s argued that the “new racism” was one cloaked in the language of individualism, the free market, and capitalism. Private real estate practices and public housing policies shape, and are shaped by, these shifting yet persistent notions of race. As Gotham argues:

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<sup>75</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 127-38.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

Racialized meanings and interpretations of home and neighborhood are both an important cause and effect of the spatial separation and isolation of Whites and poor minorities . . . this conjoining of race and space . . . continues to underlie the construction of everyday knowledge and social reality among many Whites at the same time that racial ideologies, beliefs, and institutional practices have become more invisible and covert.<sup>78</sup>

The musicians I interviewed lived in this Kansas City, and the performances I attended took place in these contexts, as part of the material, spatial, and ideological realities of living in Kansas City in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. These performers, most of them white, would have the privilege of ignoring these realities in their everyday lives, but the fact that they perform various forms of black music, sometimes with non-whites, and in spaces all over the Kansas City area, means that they may be more aware of racial divides than whites not associated with jazz or other performances in Kansas City. The history of segregated musicians unions in Kansas City has reinforced these color lines. Founded in 1917, the Musicians Protective Union Local No. 627 first served as an organization for semi-professional African American musicians in Kansas City to protect against poor treatment and low wages for black musicians. The union grew over the next several years and soon included many full time professional musicians within its ranks, especially with the influx of musicians into Kansas City from the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) and “territory bands” from the mid- and southwest. In 1930, the union established its permanent headquarters at 1823 Highland in the prosperous 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine district, which today still serves as the cultural and social center of the union’s activities. The building was quickly established as a black community space, where black workers could perform, socialize, jam, and get more work. By the 1960’s, when other segregated musicians unions began

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 150.

to merge, many black musicians in Kansas City resisted integration with the white local 34. The 627 provided black musicians with substantial work, and, some black members argued, integrating with white musicians might cut down on those opportunities. In 1970, the national headquarters of the American Federation of Musicians forced the two unions to merge. They established the Mutual Musicians Foundation as a corporation to maintain the space at 1823 Highland as a social club for musicians and audiences; it is one of the few spaces in the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine District that has remained opened since the early days of Kansas City jazz, maintaining the tradition of Friday and Saturday night jam sessions that it established in the 1920's.<sup>79</sup> The history of these unions highlights the issues of labor and race, the long tradition of black self-determination, and the stakes for those who seek to cross racial lines—issues that in broad ways shape Kansas City's current jazz, art, and avant-garde scenes.

In other ways, musicians and organizers have reached across racial, gender, and aesthetic boundaries since the 1960's through jazz in Kansas City. The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival began in 1978, bringing in improvising women from all over the world and revitalizing the reputation in America of Kansas City-born trombonist and arranger Melba Liston.<sup>80</sup> Throughout 1980, Sun Ra brought his band to Kansas City for weeks at a time, attracting white and non-white audiences interested in avant-garde jazz. In 1987 and 1988, African American avant-garde jazz and classical composer and pianist Anthony Davis performed several of his compositions with the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, also bringing in improvising percussionists Gerry Hemingway and Pheeroan akLaff.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Haddix, "Musicians Local No. 627 and the Mutual Musicians Foundation: The Cradle of Kansas City Jazz."

<sup>80</sup> Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 250.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Davis, *The Ghost Factory*, (Gramavision, 1988).

The participants in the underground Mardi Gras parade in Kansas City have also grown up in the context of cross-racial coalitions in Kansas City, like the neighborhood associations in the early 1970's that Gotham mentions.<sup>82</sup> Recent efforts by community members who have experienced and studied the history of racial and spatial separation in Kansas City symbolized by the "Troost Wall" have sought to revitalize the area, to metaphorically tear down the Wall and create a diverse inner city core once again. In 2012, two organizations, the Green Impact Zone of Missouri and Brush Creek Community Partners, hosted an event to celebrate these efforts, exemplified by the building of the "Troost Bridge" over Brush Creek at 48<sup>th</sup> Street and Troost Avenue.<sup>83</sup> The event, a free street festival on the bridge itself, was called "Meet Me at the Bridge." The festival's organizers recognized the symbolism of the Troost Wall in Kansas City history: "For years, Troost Avenue has been symbolic of some of the division in our community. With this street festival, we'll celebrate how it connects us -- north and south, east and west, black and white."<sup>84</sup> Significantly, the event featured local jazz from established mainstream artists David Basse, Bobby Watson, and Book of Gaia. Local jazz writer Bill Brownlee counted about 250 people at the event, which also featured speeches by "a host of politicians, community organizers, educators, environmental advocates and representatives of neighborhood associations," but he noted that the festival was a community event "that just happened to feature jazz."<sup>85</sup> One local musician I spoke to, trumpeter Hermon Mehari, performed with Bobby Watson's group and remembers the audience being fairly racially diverse though heavily skewed

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<sup>82</sup> Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development*, 134-36.

<sup>83</sup> Green Impact Zone of Missouri, "Troost Avenue Bridge Festival," accessed April 2, 2013. <http://greenimpactzone.org/festival/>.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Bill Brownlee, "Review: The Meet Me at the Bridge Festival," May 7, 2012. <http://www.plasticsax.blogspot.com/2012/05/review-meet-at-bridge-festival.html>.

toward middle aged and older Kansas Citians.<sup>86</sup> While Brownlee might see jazz as coincidental to the community event, I'd like to suggest they are significant as a demonstration of this particular group's belief that jazz has to do with race and place. Presenting a jazz performance at this event signifies that at least some community leaders in Kansas City today recognize that jazz can and has crossed racial lines, and that the sounds of jazz are also intimately tied to specific spaces in Kansas City.

The Top of the Bottoms Mardi Gras parade took place a few months before the Troost Bridge event, but it has an older history. It was organized by Kansas City trumpeter Bob Asher, a member of the multicultural Afro-funk and hip hop band Hearts of Darkness. In 2000, Asher founded The Top of the Bottoms Social Club, based on New Orleans social aid and pleasure clubs and named after the Kansas City working class and bohemian neighborhood The West Bottoms. Through Top of the Bottoms, Asher organized yearly carnival events in Kansas City, especially masquerade balls that featured local music, including some Kansas City avant-garde acts such as the PLBB and Mark Southerland's groups Snuff Jazz and Urban Noise Camp.<sup>87</sup> The parade I attended in 2012 included other locally organized social clubs, floats, a parade, and brass band music—most of the trappings of traditional Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans. This event, however, was different from recent New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations in several ways: only about 100 people participated, as opposed to the thousands who ride floats or watch parades in New Orleans; The Top of the Bottoms event was not organized or sanctioned by the city; and there was almost no audience separate from the participants in the parade.

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<sup>86</sup> Hermon Mehari. Interview with author. May 21, Telephone.

<sup>87</sup> Barry Anderson, "The Top of the Bottoms Is Ketchup City's Mardi Gras Break Down," *The Pitch*, February 22 2011.

A much larger, highly advertised, and corporate-sponsored event took place in Kansas City the Saturday before Mardi Gras at the Power and Light District, a former industrial center in Kansas City's downtown that has been recently renovated into an upscale entertainment area with bars, restaurants, shopping, and night clubs. The Power and Light District caters to middle and upper class patrons, and until recently, strictly enforced a dress code that excluded many African Americans. The code, established by the commercial real estate leaders who developed the Power and Light District, forbids "sleeveless shirts on men; profanity on clothing; sweat pants or full sweat suits; bandanas; exposed undergarments on men; [and] excessively long shirts,"<sup>88</sup> all styles associated with hip hop apparel and thus young African Americans. The language of the code is especially directed toward young African American men, whose bodily presence would ostensibly endanger the image of middle class white respectability that the District seeks to promote. The dress code was challenged in court in 2010 and is no longer strictly enforced, but the code is still intact and the message of exclusion remains.<sup>89</sup> This development of racialized space in the Power and Light District continues the racist real estate practices that Gotham describes as shaping the character of Kansas City and its suburbs. The Top of the Bottoms' Mardi Gras parade may not be so overtly exclusionary, but the power relations based on race that it highlights are just as vexed.

Some scholarship on carnival time parades discusses its community-building potential, as well as its subversiveness, as a retaking of urban spaces that had been territorialized through urban development, interstate highway construction, urban renewal programs, rezoning of

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<sup>88</sup> "Kansas City Power and Light District," accessed April 2, 2013.

<http://www.powerandlightdistrict.com/index.cfm?page=info>.

<sup>89</sup> Lynn Horsley, "K.C. Takes up Dress Code Complaints," *Kansas City Star*, February 25 2009; Deann Smith, "Cordish Opposes K.C. Dress Code Ordinance," *ibid.*, February 27; Michael Mansur, "K.C. Ordinance Would Attach Fiscal Notes to Citizen Petitions," *ibid.*, May 13 2010.

neighborhoods into warehouses and other commercial spaces for large corporate multinational use. Such parades repurpose that space for communal activity, pleasure, fun, noise, creativity, and the movement of bodies on the street. They subvert the alienating spaces of industrial warehouses, chain hotels, tourists spots, and government buildings and create community connection, reminding those in the community of their connection to each other, playing it out in movement and music from house to house, from location to location.<sup>90</sup>

The Kansas City Mardi Gras parade displays many of these elements—the carnivalesque reshuffling of power relations—but in many ways it is not so subversive or revolutionary. The parade reappropriates the spaces of downtown Kansas City—warehouses, rarely used streets, office buildings—for pleasure and fun. The parade is so small that they do not apply for a permit from the city; instead, they march illegally down the right side of the street only. Thus, the parade’s unofficial slogan is “Keep That Lane Open,” the phrase the parade leaders yell to keep the participants in the right lane and allow cars to pass by. The parade exhibits many qualities of Bakhtin’s carnival that Ake claims for jazz: laughter, irreverence, a blurring of boundaries between audience and performer, and a grand sense of presentation. It critiques the use of city streets for the sole purpose of commercial or personal vehicle transport, calling into question the ideology that separates bodies in space according to racial taxonomies. It also critiques the corporatization of public events, juxtaposing the commercialized yet racially policed Mardi Gras celebration in the Power and Light District with its own freer, more communitarian and multicultural event. The better future it embodies is one where people can freely and safely walk

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<sup>90</sup> Monique Guillory, "Black Bodies Swingin': Race, Gender, and Jazz," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*.

down deserted city streets at night, making whatever noise they wish collectively, without individual and communal pleasure being co-opted by commercial culture.

The parade, however, should not be mistaken as a political protest or a march with overtly political themes or messages. They are not a protest group like the young African Americans marching in 1968 against school segregation in Kansas City on the occasion of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral, as mentioned in Chapter One. Those protestors marched in the opposite direction on 12<sup>th</sup> St., crossing Troost Ave., passing just north of the area that became the Power and Light District, and heading to city hall. This parade has no such specific or explicit political intention. The parade is also not directly involved in the Occupy Movement, although individual participants might be active with Occupy KC. The parade's reappropriation of public and private spaces certainly has some affinity with some of Occupy's carnivalesque methods; while the political and social potential of the Occupy Movement might also apply to this Mardi Gras parade, so would many of the criticisms of the movement's blindness toward its own privilege. More importantly, the parade demonstrates how carnival time and official time exist simultaneously, rather than, as Bakhtin suggests, completely separate from one another. The call of "Keep that lane open!" is an aural reminder of this coexistence—that, in the modern world, carnival time is not complete and universal. Instead, it exists alongside official time, which is itself incomplete. The unofficial slogan of the underground parade serves as a self-policing gesture that keeps the parade hemmed in, lest the revelry and chaos get "out of control" and threaten official time's ultimate dominance. On the other hand, the fact that the phrase exists at all means that the carnival serves as a constant threat to official time; in order to maintain its dominance, official time must always police the carnival in some way. The phrase is also a reminder that carnival takes place within contexts that it cannot hope to transcend or "be free of."

Instead, parade marchers figure out how to move, in Danielle Goldman's phrase, within the bounds of the carnival and along the right lane of the street.

The paraders' movements (and the sounds they make) connect them to each other, and their movements through particular spaces connect their practices in the present to Kansas City's jazz past. The parade line is thus also a line of historical narrative, telling a particular story about jazz history, art, movement, and the avant-garde in Kansas City. The significance of the parade's route—from the bohemian and artsy Crossroads District to the historic 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine District and the Blue Room jazz club—should not be underestimated. By connecting visual arts with improvised jazz through the movement of bodies across urban spaces, the parade itself suggests that costuming, visual art, and movement—not to mention laughter, fun, and chaos—are just as much a part of jazz's past and present as the more restrained professionalism represented by a typical jazz night club. It allows the young, multiethnic (but predominantly white), creative, and bohemian participants to acknowledge the importance of Kansas City's jazz scene spaces to their own lives, past and present. The parade thus suggests other ways of looking at jazz history that include “non-musical” elements like movement and costuming, that make room for the participation of moving bodies—jazz history that listens for weird bodily noises. It connects the two areas of town that have been separated by history, “urban renewal” programs, white flight, and interstate construction. The cheers that go up as the parade passes underneath US-71 and over Troost Ave. are a kind of recognition of that past and the hope that those connections may again be made. It is a carnivalesque celebration of a future in which space is not so rigidly or insidiously regulated along racial lines.

To be sure, the spectacle of mostly white paraders moving and sounding in ways that reinforce associations of jazz with laughter, entertainment, and the body might gloss over the

great efforts African American jazz musicians have made and continue to make to be considered “respectable” professionals by the white mainstream. This may also explain the reluctance of black musicians in Kansas City in the 1960’s to merge with the white musicians’ union—their jobs would be at stake. As I noted above, many of the scholars who analyze humor in jazz are careful not to discount this history. In many ways the Blue Room, a jazz club connected to a jazz museum, represents both those struggles and achievements, as well as the struggles to revive the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine District as a “respectable” and thriving center of black culture and business. The boisterous parade of mostly white young people, intruding on the Blue Room’s professional space and taking up the streets and sidewalks in the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine District, may also endanger that sense of progress. However, the young African Americans and other people of color participating in the underground Mardi Gras parade may demonstrate yet further shifts in multicultural relations and black identities, building cross-cultural coalitions that attempt to understand the history that shaped them, creating cultural hybrids like those Paul Gilroy values, and performing an embodied crossing of racial lines en masse.

Studying this play of dominant and subordinate as it dances, struts, trips, jumps, and walks down an otherwise empty street, making sounds in a quiet part of town that might be labeled as “noise,” requires a method that is interdisciplinary, embodied, attentive to the present, yet aware of the past. The method I deployed to study the underground Mardi Gras parade is a largely improvised one, and it may suggest other ways to listen for weird bodily noises. The music along the parade was itself loosely structured, with no apparent leader, although the members of Top of the Bottoms, tightly clustered near the front of the parade, had the most instruments and seemed to lead the music by default. Two songs—“Iko Iko” and “Saints,” repeated several times—provided some structure, but these seemed to begin spontaneously, with

nearly everyone joining in by playing an instrument, dancing, or singing. When the column of marchers elongated, I moved up and down it, observing the ways other marchers interacted with the core of musicians from a distance. These marchers played individually, in pairs, or trios, and many of them danced while playing. Walking up and down the column allowed me to hear their improvised countermelodies, vocal lines, rhythmic guitar strumming, washboard beating, and melodic interpretations in other keys or out of tune with the core melody. When I moved closer to the core of marchers at the front, it was much harder to hear these improvisations at the spatial and sonic margins of the parade. In this way, the parade resembles Attali's "repetition;" what counts as music is limited and repeated over and over, drowning out different sounds on the margins. However, the margins still sound, and I had to move my body closer to them to hear their difference in relation to the center and move my body with them in time to their music. This bodily movement could serve as a model for critical listening. As scholars how can we shift our positions—bodily, socially, theoretically—to hear the margins better? When we move in ways and in spaces different from our habits, or from what our privilege allows, what sounds different? What does the dominant sound like from a distance and who improvises with that dominant sound? What weird bodily noises are made in the interaction of dominant and subversive sounds, and who makes them?

The Top of the Bottoms Mardi Gras parade has some political potential, but it is also an example of the "elements of play, delight, pleasure, persuasion, and joy" that Garrett argues are nonetheless important to jazz, because they contribute to "building group solidarity, surviving in the world or temporarily escaping from it."<sup>91</sup> While the parade does not have explicit political goals, it does form a temporary and shifting community that has the potential to demonstrate new

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<sup>91</sup> Garrett, "Humor of Jazz," 62.

social relations. This multiethnic group, dominated by whites, demonstrates at least some intercultural relationships through improvised performances and the reappropriation of urban space. It also recognizes the importance of local history, jazz, and African American culture to its own creative and improvisatory aspirations. It pays tribute to that connection by marching to the historic 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine Jazz District and filling with patrons its most popular and historically important nightclub, the Blue Room. The loosely organized, joyful, egalitarian, improvised music and movement that is essential to the parade are carnivalesque elements that suggest better social relations for a future that recognizes difference. However, this performance of a more just future takes place in the present that is itself shaped by the history of racialized space in Kansas City. Even if it heralds a new future, it is still caught up in the age of repetition, like all other cultural practices of today. Thus we must not mistake the carnival for everyday life, where voices dominate and drown out others struggling to be heard. For many people, those dominant voices shape a life that is much more regulated, ordered, and determined than in the carnival. For those who study music, movement, and other arts as culture, it can be helpful to pay attention to the ways skillful improvisers “figure out how to move” within the constraints of repetition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented two models for studying the social implications of improvisation in music and movement. While Attali looks for ways the noise of improvisation heralds a better future, Bakhtin examines the chaos of the carnival that critiques the official order of the present and functions as a steam valve to release the pressure of oppression. My concept of weird bodily noises is neither a perfect seer of the future nor a perfect steam valve. While I believe that improvisation does have some potential to predict a better future, it does not always

do so; the messy character of human relationships in history in which improvisation occurs complicates its powers of prognostication. The effects of historical conditions on the sounds of improvisation and the improvisers themselves should not be downplayed. Seen as a steam valve, the carnival releases the pressure built up by the force of oppression acting daily upon the bodies of the oppressed during official time; dominant groups condone the carnival because this temporary, policed release of pressure allows domination to return. A build up leading to a release makes a weird bodily noise, to be sure, and it is tempting to equate this model of carnival with not just laughter, but flatulence, burping, and any number of other bodily noises that release pressure. But if carnival is a fart, then my concept of weird bodily noises is more like irritable bowel syndrome—a constant, unstable, uncomfortable rumbling that occasionally results in outburst but does not dissipate completely. As my study of the Kansas City underground Mardi Gras has shown, carnival time and official time exist simultaneously; despite our efforts to keep that lane open, they intrude upon each other constantly. This means we can look for ways that improvisation prophesies the future, but we have to examine the ways it is affected by the conditions under which it is made and moves within those conditions. It also means looking at the ways the carnival exists here and now, how official time returns or determines carnival, and how carnival might change official time, even in small seemingly insignificant ways.

Both Attali's and Bakhtin's models are based on the assumptions that music is a social practice, that the ordering of sound is in some ways about domination and resistance, and thus that musical practices take place in power struggles that are fully embedded in the social relations of their particular times and places. These are very useful ways to study improvisation, for, as Heble argues, making music that questions or complicates the ordering of sound has social and historical impacts that can critique those dominant systems. Attali's composition and

Bakhtin's carnival represent utopias that can help us imagine a more just future and to understand the roles that improvised sound and movement might play in that better future. Any theoretical model, especially a utopian one, has its limits; none is sufficient to explain the lived experience of the performers we analyze, the complexity of social relations in which they live, and the social contexts in which those performers create their art. If we as scholars value improvisation that stretches limits and critiques dominant orders, we ought to leave open the possibility that the performers and improvised performances we favor might also critique the theoretical models, assumptions, and social privilege we bring to analysis and theorize their own performances differently.

While the weird bodily noises made PLBB and the Top of the Bottoms Mardi Gras parade might prophesy the future through improvisation, they also do so in the context of current racial and gender hierarchies. These performances consist of groups of mostly white performers crossing imaginary racial lines to make use of mostly African American art forms in order to rebel against or critique mainstream white society. In Chapter Three, I will explore the complexities of the "cross-racial imaginary" in avant-garde jazz performances as I examine the importance of Sun Ra's music to Kansas City avant-gardist Mark Southerland.

## CHAPTER 3

### WEIRD NOISES:

#### AVANT-GARDE JAZZ AND THE ‘CROSS-RACIAL IMAGINATION’

##### **Introduction**

In Chapter Two, I examined spatial lines—borders in space that marked neighborhoods; separated ghettos from suburbs from shopping districts from arts districts; that distinguished between neighborhoods targeted for civic plans of “urban renewal” or “downtown revitalization” and the dilapidated residential neighborhoods left to rot by the same city planning. It examined how one such line, the Troost Wall in Kansas City, was crossed repeatedly by both artistic and explicitly political groups of bodies, a crossing that challenged the authority of those lines, pointing to the porousness of those borders, the arbitrary way in which they seem to take hold as reality. Chapter Three explores the crossing of an imaginary border, but one with real world consequences, nonetheless: the color line. This chapter examines how that border is crossed by white bodies looking to rebel against the white mainstream, to find musical inspiration, political aspiration, and personal models in (often monolithic and reductionist) ideas about non-white subjects. This crossing makes a weird bodily noise; like a finger crossing a string, it momentarily blurs the location of the string, vibrating with sound. The concept I use to analyze these sounding, embodied, improvised performances of race is “the cross-racial imaginary.” Drawing on a body of scholarship that attempts to balance the concept of the social construction of race with evidence of its real effects, my term comes particularly from two pieces of scholarship on race, crossings, and music.

First, I take the concept of a “racial imaginary” from Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman’s collection, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, the introduction to which critiques musicology (and, in many cases, ethnomusicology) for glossing over questions of race, arguing, in fact, that the musical and the racial are mutually constitutive. To remedy this problem of omission, they want to bring conversations about cultural politics and race to musicological practice and vice versa, bridging methodological and ideological gaps between critical studies of race and musicology. This is done through a consideration of ideologies of race, which Radano and Bohlman call the “racial imagination.” They define this guiding concept as “the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as a part of the discourse network of modernity.”<sup>1</sup> While the racial imagination has real implications for social and personal identities, as ideology, it is ever-changing, especially as it intersects with other categories of difference. This instability means “race” is not a fixed concept, but a fluid “signification” with cultural meaning and affective power. This conception of race, they argue, places music in the social and cultural, even as the social and cultural resound with musical practices. Thus, the racial imagination influences how music is heard but also how it is produced, reproduced, and circulated, within the social. What is needed is an accounting for the power of music that engages critical and historical conceptions of ideologies of race.

Since Radano and Bohlman’s concept already deals with hybridities and racial boundary crossings, it might seem redundant for me to take the name “cross-racial imaginary” here. However, the crossings of these imaginary racial boundaries are what my work is most concerned with, so I modified their title to emphasize this particular aspect of their conception of

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, "Introduction: Music and Race, Their Past, Their Presence," in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

race. For Radano and Bohlman, music can be found at the very site of these racial crossings, because it “fills in the spaces between racial distinctiveness” as it becomes hybrid. Thus, different races can “share, appropriate, and dominate” music, or they can participate in “common syncretic practices” in music.<sup>2</sup> Racial domination can happen through musical discourses, but subversion or redirection of “influence” back to the oppressors is also possible. While music fills spaces between races, it may also embody certain racial significations. For Radano and Bohlman, music and race are thus essentially linked, because “discourses about music fundamentally derive from the construction and deployment of racial categories” even as those categories blur when projected back onto music. When we theorize music with race in mind, we see the ways music allows for the articulation of new, situational or strategic ethnic identities. Crossing the racial imaginary in music is thus an active, creative move that constructs new racial identities and reproduce old ones; crossing lines between racial categories can blur those lines, reinforce them, or draw new ones.

Second, my understanding of racial crossing is influenced by Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century US Literature and Culture*. Wald notes that, while the racial line has real world consequences, “its tenacity is not a sign of its absolute power. Indeed, the investment of the dominant racial discourse in the authority of a ‘line’ that eludes stable or consistent representation is necessarily generative of contradictions that are also opportunities for challenging, appropriating, or unveiling its chimerical and arbitrary nature.”<sup>3</sup> Especially helpful is her analysis of the “pliability and instrumentality of race,”<sup>4</sup> while race is ever-changing, she

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>3</sup> Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., ix.

argues, its fluidity does not inhibit its value as a tool of both dominance and resistance. As she later notes, race is “both authoritative and unstable, dominant and yet usable.”<sup>5</sup>

Its “instrumentality” is not so clear, though, as Wald points out. The narratives of passing she analyzes are “neither wholly subversive nor wholly complicit”—what I might call “weird” performances of race.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, most analysis of these narratives of “crossing the line,” she argues, focuses on the ways that the practices either resist racial hierarchies or support them; she cautions against such binary readings, which end up reinscribing the racial binaries that they purport to critique. Unraveling the complexities of performances of race, she argues,

may not be a matter of recovering a stable or transcendent opposition between stability and fluidity, transgression and compliance, but of fielding heterogeneous and impure interests and desires, with the knowledge that these, too, are always provisional and always improvised.”<sup>7</sup>

Though this is the only time Wald refers to improvisation in her discussion of race, picking up on her use of it here helps to describe the concept the cross-racial imaginary in this chapter, and weird bodily noises throughout this dissertation. The performances I discuss in this chapter—both staged with sound and movement and narrated in interviews—are improvised performances of race that are informed by “heterogeneous and impure interests and desires” and are indeed “provisional.” The fact that they are improvised means that they are spontaneous and generative yet shaped in part by larger structures and previous improvisations. Their spontaneity does not mean that these performances of race transcend those previous experiences and structures; instead, they move within them. Their messages and their meanings are unclear and equivocal,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 80.

therefore, because they are both informed by desires to transcend race and shaped by racial ideologies. Wald clearly explains the importance of complexity to concepts of identity, and my own work strives for the clarity with which she analyzes this complexity, and the imperative to leave the contradictions unresolved. Furthermore, while Wald uses “representations” and “narratives” to describe her texts, most of which are in written prose, I extend her analysis to the performance of identity itself through sound and through oral histories and ethnographic interviews. Wald examines instances of both black and white passing in her narratives, but I am particularly interested in her analysis of the latter. While the white male participants in my study may not explicitly attempt to pass as black musicians, their devotion to black music and their embodied performances of music most often associated with African Americans resembles some of the passing Wald describes. Her analysis of “white” musicians like Mezz Mezzrow “passing as black” is especially helpful in analyzing white Kansas City avant-garde jazz musicians.

In this chapter, I will argue along with Wald and Radano, that nearly all crossings of imaginary racial lines are complex, fraught with both complicity in racial hierarchies and resistance against them. Even in cases like those I examine here in which most of the white jazz musicians do not claim to try to pass for black, crossing the racial imaginary is complex and double sided, full of tension and unresolved conflicts. This analysis does not mean I am singling out particular participants as “problematic” and others as more easily conforming to a liberatory model of improvisation. Instead, I am interested in the ways that all improvised performances involve race, gender, space, and a host of other social political, and identity markers, simply because humans improvise. Studying improvisation in this way can help us to see the brilliant, hilarious, vexed, inspiring, and difficult ways humans interact. White musicians need not make a claim like Mezzrow’s in order to perform the cross-racial imaginary, but their involvement in

raced music like jazz—as well as their own narratives about that involvement—allows them to cross these lines. Because of struggles throughout the history of jazz over race, ownership, authenticity, and appropriation, a study of jazz musicians crossing imaginary lines of race in different ways can highlight the many ways people confront and use ideas of race.

To explore the cross-racial imaginary further, I will focus on three Kansas City avant-garde jazz musicians: Arnold Young, Dwight Frizzell, and Mark Southerland. All three musicians are white, heterosexual males, and all three express an admiration of Sun Ra, African American bandleader, improviser, and philosopher. These musicians have claimed Ra as an influence, crossing imaginary lines of race for musical, visual, poetic, and philosophical inspiration. Although Sun Ra's work is not necessarily central to each musician's creative practices, their similar admiration for him offers a convenient entry point into issues of race, appropriation, and resistance.

Sun Ra has influenced many white musicians, and many in Kansas City. Ra's band performed often in Kansas City throughout the 1980's, and musicians in the scene now often remember that intense period of activity as influential in Kansas City avant-garde jazz. Although Young did not live in Kansas City during Sun Ra's visits, he did adopt the nickname "Unra" as a tribute to one of his musical heroes.<sup>8</sup> Frizzell helped facilitate Sun Ra's visits, becoming not only Ra's booking agent in Kansas City for a time, but also helping him locate obscure books on religion and Egyptology, and conducting lengthy interviews with him. Southerland makes philosophical connections to Ra, claiming to be influenced by Ra's Afrofuturism. In many ways,

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<sup>8</sup> Young came up with the name during a late-night car ride with friends and fellow musicians sometime in 1970. Under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, they began a game of wordplay using the names of well known jazz musicians and whatever else came to mind—"Sun Monk," "Monk Ra," etc. After passing a billboard advertising the soft drink 7-Up as "The Uncola," Young blurted out "Unra!" and the name stuck.

the claims on African American culture made by Frizzell and Young resemble statements made by two other jazz musicians seen as “white”—Mezz Mezzrow, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, and Johnny Otis, the son of Greek immigrants. Gayle Wald’s work on Mezzrow’s autobiography as a “passing narrative” and George Lipsitz’s biography of Johnny Otis serve as conceptual frameworks I employ here to explore Young’s and Frizzell’s weird whiteness. While this scholarly work also in part helps explain Southerland’s use of race, as I will show, his borrowing of Sun Ra’s philosophies and aesthetic practices that critique dominant Western notions of progress and history offer somewhat more productive examples of crossing the racial imaginary. All three musicians’ creative practices and personal narratives are fraught with the characteristics of all racial crossing—power and desire.

### **“Totally Perverted by the All Pervasive and Healing Power of Negro Music”: The White Jazz Avant-Garde in Kansas City**

As I mentioned in Chapter One, Arnold Young played in one of the first-recorded avant-garde jazz performances in Kansas City with bassist Richard Youngstein and pianist Manford Eaton in 1965. These musicians were left out of the broader history of jazz, but they benefitted from their social positions as college-educated, middle class, white, heterosexual males. They sometimes recognized the difficulties black musicians suffered being members of a minority in Kansas City, but they also occasionally failed to recognize their own privilege. For instance, in the 1970’s, Young’s band Advertisement for a Dream mixed funk, rock, and avant-garde jazz much in the same way that the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Black Artists Group did, with a crucial difference, as Young notes: “That’s the thing. We were sort of doing what Black Artists

Group was doing in St. Louis at the same time, but we were white!”<sup>9</sup> Young here appears to refer strictly to the musical aspects of the Black Artists Group (BAG), not their political activity or multi-disciplinary arts approach. If Advertisement for a Dream was involved in the Civil Rights Movement or other political activity in Kansas City, Young did not mention it. I did not ask about his political participation, but the fact that he did not mention it here suggests that political participation is not central to how he thinks about his music and race. He does go on to discuss the influence of black musicians on his own music: “I mean if you’re a drummer and you play the music I play, you’re generally a black person . . . Mostly everything I’ve done, the big influence in my life as far as drums go, has definitely been Afrocentric.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Young is able to cross an imaginary line of race to collect musical inspiration whether or not he participated directly in political struggles that benefit minorities.

Young’s willingness to open himself to black cultural production indicates a somewhat complex idea of race that does not rely solely on ideologies of biological essentialism. Other statements he made about his interests in black music offer a site to explore complexities of the cross-racial imaginary further. Young admitted in 1980, “If I hadn’t been totally perverted by the all pervasive and healing power of Negro music, I’d be playing something like [the music of Iggy Pop]. Once you find out about Negro music, it’s all over.”<sup>11</sup> What Young repeats here is a version of the racist “one-drop” rule that legally defined race in the U.S. by asserting that anyone whose has only one drop of “black blood,” going back an unlimited number of generations, is considered black. The rule led to state-by-state legal definitions of race in the U.S. after Reconstruction and served as the legal basis for the “separate but equal” ruling of *Plessy v.*

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<sup>9</sup> Young interview, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Frizzell, "Unra," 12.

*Ferguson* in 1896, and its effects registered throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As Wald notes, “The one-drop rule is not the only standard of racial definition, yet it has disproportionately shaped the U.S. social and cultural imagination of race . . . By representing ‘whiteness’ as the absence of the racial sign, it has perpetuated the myth of white purity.”<sup>12</sup>

In Young’s case, blackness “perverts”—distorts, corrupts, or ruins—otherwise “pure” whiteness. Young uses this term facetiously, in order to critique the notion of white purity. For him, blackness is also “all pervasive,” meaning that whiteness is never really pure, and the “healing power” of blackness, delivered through black music, brings universal benefits. Young’s ironic use of the ideology of the one-drop rule here is a performance of weird whiteness, allowing him simultaneously to critique the myth of white purity and maintain simplistic or romanticized notions of blackness. As Wald notes about white passing narratives, “The cultural and political implications of ‘becoming’ black complicate the theoretical questions of racial fluidity and performativity that such statements brings to light . . . the desire to pass is rarely ever manifested as a monolithic expression of racial insurgency or self-interest.”<sup>13</sup> While Young’s crossing of the racial imaginary complicates essentialist discourses about race, especially whiteness, it also reinscribes the very racist discourse it complicates by positing an ideal, monolithic, and “pure” blackness from which whites may appropriate (or steal) in order to make themselves “better whites.”

Young later uses the metaphor of perversion to describe avant-garde black music specifically, suggesting that his idea of blackness is not so monolithic. According to his narrative, as he himself was “perverted” by black music, he also spread the contagion of black experimentalism to other white musicians in Kansas City. While playing with white R&B and

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<sup>12</sup> Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

funk musicians in the 1970's, he began introducing them to jazz through 1960's "funky" hardbop recordings like those of Horace Silver, Lee Morgan, and Art Blakey. Then he played them John Coltrane's modal and free music, followed by that of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. This gradually increasing dosage of black avant-garde music father "perverted" the white R&B musicians, slowly "poisoning" their tastes for more commercial successful black music with black avant-garde experimentalism. Even if Young recognizes in free jazz a different performance of blackness, he still romanticizes it here, describing it as a tool for white self-improvement.

Young's story about contact with the mostly white counterculture of the 1960's further illustrates his complex relationship to black music:

I lived in California for three months . . . in 1966. I couldn't get in with the hippie thing too much. They didn't even know who Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers were! You know? They didn't know who John Coltrane was. They were talking about freedom and I was playing free. I mean they were nice people and all . . . How many copies have I owned of *Out to Lunch* by Eric Dolphy? Probably 15, because I gave all my records away because I was trying to turn people on to the music I like.<sup>14</sup>

Young's narrative here serves as a critique of the "hippie" movement, especially in the way it reproduced racial hierarchies, often by attempting to ignore racial difference and historical struggle in favor of a color-blind universality. Young seems to say that the counterculture's appeal to "freedom" was hypocritical because it did not appreciate black culture to the extent he did—by learning a range of black musical styles and sometimes playing with black musicians. He reads their notion of freedom as white, and argues that a truer conception of freedom can be

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<sup>14</sup> Young interview, 2012.

found through listening to and playing music of African Americans, not to mention playing *with* African Americans. But his story centers on his own achievements as a white avant-garde jazz musician, positioning himself outside mainstream jazz, the white mainstream, and even the white counterculture. His love of black music facilitates this positioning and once again reinscribes some of the racial ideologies while complicating others.

Another Kansas City avant-gardist, Dwight Frizzell, also expresses great affinity with black music; examining his statements about black music and culture will help further explore the complexities of the cross-racial imaginary. In a 2000 interview, Frizzell stated, “Swing seems so natural to me and I consider it my cultural heritage, the center of my soul, to be Afro-American—at least this is the heritage that I owe the most to.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike Young’s story of allowing black music to “pervert” his “pure” whiteness, Frizzell here claims that his whiteness was never pure in the first place. Indeed, he relies on blackness as a “heritage” so strongly that it occupies a place of importance in his constructed self, or his “soul.” His next sentence backs off of this claim somewhat, admitting that his subjectivity may include lots of different “heritages” of which “Afro-American” plays a prominent part. Frizzell here critiques the myth of white purity and thus the notion of race as essential. Unlike Young, who implies that the “pure” whiteness is sullied when whites allow themselves to be “contaminated” by blackness, Frizzell suggests the possibility that whiteness is itself not a pure concept. However, like Young, he relies on a monolithic notion of blackness as a homogeneous “heritage” which whites are free to adopt or borrow from. He also uses the widely circulated notion of white privilege that whites can “borrow” from lots of different “cultural heritages,” always a veiled reference to race and colonialism. When Frizzell repeated a similar claim in our interview, he added, “Easy for the

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Warburton, "Independence Daze: The World of the Reverend Dwight Frizzell," *Paris Transatlantic Magazine* 2000.

white guy to say,” suggesting that he is also aware of his privileged position in this cultural borrowing.<sup>16</sup>

Like Young, Frizzell feels a deep aesthetic connection to Sun Ra. He heard Sun Ra’s 1965 album *The Magic City* while in high school in the early 1970’s. This record seems to have served as his introduction to black experimentalism; he said he was attracted to the “mystery of it. I’m not quite sure what it means.”<sup>17</sup> Frizzell’s romanticized view of blackness positions the Other as unknowable and mysterious, elusive yet compelling—a mystery to be explored and eventually grasped or conquered. Certainly, the music on *The Magic City* would have sounded to Frizzell significantly different from black popular music in wider circulation in the 1970’s. Its experiments with long forms, timbre, time, and melodies sound more “out” than popular free jazz albums by Pharoah Sanders and Charles Lloyd, for instance. But Frizzell had also listened to Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, and other white experimentalists, which might have prepared him for the “noise” in Ra’s work, but perhaps not the “black noise” of Ra as a different raced subject.<sup>18</sup> Listening to the European avant-garde (which itself often argued for universality and the transcendence of ideas like race<sup>19</sup>) would not have prepared him to understand the different kinds of blackness that Sun Ra’s music sounds out. The fact that he considered Ra’s music to be a “mystery” means that he was unable to fathom the kinds of black performance he heard there. The performances of blackness in widest circulation at the time—the ones he would have had access to as a white person interested in black popular music, growing up in the segregated town of Independence, MO, living in racially segregated Kansas City—coupled with dominant racial

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<sup>16</sup> Frizzell interview, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press: Published by University Press of New England, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," in *The Other Side of Nowhere* (2004).

ideologies, would not have prepared him for Sun Ra's "weird noise." His reaction to that lack of understanding is to be attracted to those performances—a fascination with weird blackness that informs his own creative work.

Some of Frizzell's recordings represent his fascination with Sun Ra's work and may in part stand as his attempt to understand or grasp Ra through Frizzell's own music. Released in 1976, *Beyond the Black Crack* is Frizzell's collection of sound collages, electronic and acoustic instrument experiments, and instrumental jazz-rock improvisations that evinces Frizzell's interests in Cage, Stockhausen, Frank Zappa, and Ra. The humorous title (along with one of his band's names, Anal Magic) suggests the anatomy and functioning of the "lower strata" of the body celebrated by Bakhtin as essential to the carnivalesque resistance to power. The liner notes tell a science fiction tale, in which an enormous black hole threatens to swallow the entire universe, but a small group of people escape through a "black crack" and "enter a new universe where anything can happen."<sup>20</sup> The narrative of escaping to outer space is one that occurs in much of Sun Ra's work, most notably in his film *Space is the Place*.<sup>21</sup> In *Beyond the Black Crack*, in order to escape the dominance of white culture (represented by the black hole that draws all matter into itself), the band of white musicians seeks refuge within black culture (represented by the black crack), which is full of possibilities.

The fact that the crack is black suggests the racist ideology that associates African Americans with the body as a site of sexuality, bodily function, and labor, a connection that simultaneously links them with animals and asserts that this connection to the body makes non-whites supposedly more free. It also reinforces the Cartesian mind-body split, aligning white,

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<sup>20</sup> Dwight Frizzell, Rev. Dwight Frizzell and Anal Magic: *Beyond the Black Crack*, 1976. Paradigm Discs 06. 2008 CD reissue.

<sup>21</sup> Sun Ra and Joshua Smith, *Space Is the Place*, (North American Star System, 1974).

Western culture with the mind, philosophy, education, and other “higher” functions, and all non-white culture with the body and the “lower functions” of sexuality, digestion, excretion, and physical labor. A desire to fall into the black crack might also suggest a sexual reading: the heterosexual white male musician expresses a queer desire to enter, possess, or get lost inside the black body through the anal crack, a process of mystical transformation through the stereotypical sexual/spiritual powers of the black body represented by “anal magic.” This is also a rebellion against the tenacity and power of normative, procreative, heterosexual vaginal sex acts—the “black hole” that threatens to destroy everything. Alternatively, the fear of the black hole might suggest an expression of male fear of black women’s sexual organs and a desire for anal sex (regardless of the gender of the partner). What Frizzell does here with sexuality and gender is unclear and ultimately not as important as how that sexuality is linked closely to race; Frizzell express here a desire to redeem or transform his whiteness through an (unspecified) sex act. While Frizzell’s language here to me does not suggest conquest or colonization of that black body, it does depict using part of a black body for transformation, which is itself a kind of domination.

That Frizzell’s Black Crack exists in space also suggests a kind of universalization of that “free” connection to the body, a refutation of Cartesian dualism that locates black ruptures of white culture everywhere, but does so, nevertheless, through an romanticization of black sound and black bodies. The crack is a rupture in the homogeneous material of the universe, perhaps similar to Fred Moten’s concept of “the break,” the always contentious or deconstructive element that troubles the whole or that problematizes the universal. Like the black crack, the break can appear anywhere because it is everywhere; it is the “universalization of discontinuity, where

discontinuity could be figured as ubiquitous minority.”<sup>22</sup> Falling into the black crack for Frizzell represents white desires to inhabit alternative black cultural spaces, to make a weird escape from mainstream whiteness through the break of black culture, conceived as low, sexual, bodily, and free.

For Sun Ra, space did indeed have these transformative possibilities for equality, escape, and justice. Frizzell was interested in Ra’s alternative epistemology and fascinated not just by his music but his thinking. Frizzell conducted several interviews with Ra in the 1980’s during Ra’s frequent visits to Kansas City. He took seriously Ra’s use of language, his philosophical musings, and his often difficult way of expressing his ideas, printing large chunks of Ra’s words in his record store publication *The Penny Pitch*.<sup>23</sup> Frizzell spoke of Ra with affection, claiming to have developed a friendship with Ra during this time. He also said he felt like something of a “disciple” of Ra’s, “like Ra had something to say and I was listening.”<sup>24</sup>

Frizzell tells a story involving Sun Ra and race that took place during one of these many visits. Frizzell had become one of Ra’s regular contacts in KANSAS CITY, booking and advertising gigs, helping his band find lodging, and tracking down obscure religious books at Ra’s request. Frizzell recalls that at one show, he gathered backstage with Kansas City’s “black intelligentsia” who had come to the show. He heard Ra giving a polemic “about how slavery was a ‘good thing’ for black people because it gave them a sense of discipline they needed.” Frizzell’s assessment of this speech, that it was “incredibly provocative in this particular context,” is an understatement, but Ra’s theme does seem to go along with some of what he was

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<sup>22</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight Frizzell, "The Ancient Egyptian Reader: Some Time with Sun Ra and the Rev.," *The Pitch* 1980, 13; Sun Ra, "The K.C.-Ra Connection," *ibid.* 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Frizzell interview, 2010.

preaching at the time about freedom and discipline.<sup>25</sup> Frizzell here narrates himself as occupying a privileged space among Ra's fans and followers, overhearing, from what he seems to conceive is an almost neutral vantage point, Ra talk to other African Americans. Such a statement as Ra made would be "provocative" in any context, but what seems important to Frizzell's story is that he was permitted to hear it said among African Americans. He goes on to claim that Ra's rhetoric later become more "omniversal" as it tried to convince whites that they had been "duped into accepting our role as racists." It seems that "omniversal" here for Frizzell means that Ra's philosophical statements became more directed toward whites and less critical of other African Americans.

An analysis of Frizzell's cross-racial imaginary can be helped by comparison to another musician who expressed affinity with black musicians, Johnny Otis. George Lipsitz's biography of Otis, *Midnight at the Barrelhouse*, depicts him as a "good example" of a cross-racial performer. Otis, born in Los Angeles in 1921 to Greek immigrant parents, identified himself as "black by persuasion." When his family suffered hard times through the Depression, he began to "move toward Black culture and away from white ethnic identity" as he saw unions and political groups organize across racial lines.<sup>26</sup> He also witnessed and experienced racism as a member of mostly black bands touring the South, a partner in an interracial couple, and a father of children who were seen as black.

Otis's music was influenced by African American musics, and he participated in civil rights activism. His entire career, Lipsitz argues, "depended on his appreciation of the aesthetic, moral, intellectual, and spiritual power of the Black community," as well on Otis' view of the

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<sup>25</sup> Warburton, "Independence Daze."

<sup>26</sup> George Lipsitz, *Midnight at the Barrelhouse: The Johnny Otis Story*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiv.

“African character: an indomitable and indefatigable insistence on resistance and survival.”<sup>27</sup>

Otis was not just committed to racial equality; his “understandings of individual achievement and collective destiny come directly from the things that Black people and Black communities taught him.”<sup>28</sup> Thus for Lipsitz, while the critical or radical stances of African Americans derive from their experiences as raced subjects, it is possible for others who are not raced black to feel those critiques deeply and deploy them to help produce new epistemologies and identities that emphasize justice and equality. This generative ability to identify with raced subjects affectively and bodily is central to my concept of the cross-racial imaginary.

But I also argue that this crossing does not necessarily result in “justice and equality,” because racist ideologies produced the imaginary lines in the first place; the material realities of whites who cross those lines allows them to do so. Like many whites interested in black culture, Otis made statements praising African Americans that nevertheless relied on romanticized notions of African Americans as supposedly more emotional, primitive, and less repressed. For Lipsitz, these were “comments about culture rather than color,” the result of an intellectual tradition that “provided mechanisms for turning hegemony on its head, for turning ascriptions about Blacks into positive affirmations.”<sup>29</sup> The same can be said for Arnold Young’s and Dwight Frizzell’s statements about black culture that critique ideologies of race as well as institutional racism. However, Otis made his problematic statements in the 1930’s and 1940’s according to Lipsitz, decades before Young and Frizzell made theirs. Their words are not examples of lingering individual ignorance and conservatism; rather, Young’s and Frizzell’s statements indicate the persistence of racist ideology and white privilege on a broad scale, even among

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xxviii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 170.

whites who express affinity with certain aspects of black culture, identify with blackness, and desire it to transform their whiteness.

In many ways, Otis, Mezzrow, Young, and Frizzell deploy a method that Lipsitz calls “strategic anti-essentialism,” which he defines as “identifying with a group to which you do *not* belong, presenting yourself as someone else in order to express more effectively who you actually are.”<sup>30</sup> The most effective uses of strategic anti-essentialism have occurred among minorities in struggles against racist power structures, but whites have used it to varying degrees, especially in music, as Lipsitz points out.<sup>31</sup> This strategy does not erase power relations or historical oppression, however; when whites identify with or as blacks to express who they “actually are,” this may contribute to a project of white self-improvement more than to the dismantling of racial hierarchies. While Otis participated in black freedom struggles, even accepting that the Watts Riots of 1965 might indicate the waning of white supremacy, Young and Frizzell did not mention any participation in civil rights struggles, nor do they perform with non-whites as often as Johnny Otis did. Furthermore, neither one (to my knowledge) identifies as the descendant of immigrants or makes any claim to immigrant status as both Otis and Mezzrow did. These differences make Young’s and Frizzell’s crossings of imaginary lines of race more problematic and more complex—and perhaps not as effective at battling racism as Lipsitz depicts Otis doing. But Frizzell’s friendship with Ra, his active interest in Ra’s philosophy and its universal application, as well as his love for his music, indicates a close, meaningful crossing of racial lines, a strategic anti-essentialism that not only allows Frizzell to construct a public self but to spread an alternative epistemology that he finds meaningful and critical of mainstream culture.

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<sup>30</sup> *Footsteps in the Dark*, 204.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite a century of cultural theft and exploitation of black music and musicians,<sup>32</sup> some white musicians have also created alliances with black musicians in cultural and political struggles. Avant-garde jazz, springing up at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and flourishing along with the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, is also bound up in issues of racial equality, political struggle, and conceptions of freedom. White avant-garde musicians like Roswell Rudd, Carla Bley, Paul Bley, Mike Mantler, Charlie Haden, and David Izenzon worked with black avant-garde musicians in creative and social struggles in the last half of the twentieth century. Although some work exists on the complex relationships among white and black avant-garde jazz musicians, black nationalism, and the cross-racial imaginary, more work can be done in this area.<sup>33</sup> Rudd serves as an example of a white musician working with African Americans but who also performs a kind of weird whiteness. He expressed solidarity with black musicians, performed with them, recorded with Amiri Baraka, and participated in a “play-in” with Archie Shepp, but he also expressed problematic notions of the “universality” of black culture (“the blues”) that are at odds with Shepp and others’ black nationalism.<sup>34</sup>

White avant-garde musicians participated in these struggles in both overtly political and broader cultural arenas through jazz performance. Charlie Haden’s work with Ornette Coleman in the 1950’s and 1960’s, as well as his work with the People’s Liberation Orchestra, are examples of this expression of solidarity in black struggles that is itself fraught with inequalities.

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<sup>32</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Robin Kelley has argued that the avant-garde was interracial early in its history but was dubbed “The New Black Music” by critic Amiri Baraka. Robin D. G. Kelley, “New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz Avant-Garde,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (1999): 144. Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Anderson, *This Is Our Music*.

<sup>34</sup> *This Is Our Music*, 177; Jason Robinson, “The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-Garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique en Improvisation* 1, no. 2 (2005).

When performing in Portugal in 1968, Haden raised a Black Power salute along with two of his black bandmates, Dewey Redman and Ed Blackwell. He also introduced his “Song for Che” as a show of support for blacks in Portugal who were oppressed by the government at the time. Haden was later arrested at the airport for this political statement. He had consulted with Coleman before he made the statement; Coleman gave his blessing but did not participate in the public display.<sup>35</sup> Coleman’s silence was remarkable because he acted contrary to the expectations of liberal whites, who would expect African Americans to appreciate and support white solidarity with black struggles. While Redman and Blackwell raised their fists with Haden, neither they nor Coleman participated in Haden’s spoken statement; the Portuguese government, responding more to word than gesture, arrested Haden. Coleman as probably aware that the ramifications of making such a statement were different for Haden as it would be for them—as African Americans performing in public in Portugal when Africans were oppressed there. Haden was interrogated but eventually freed when an officer from the U.S. embassy arrived. Neither the Portuguese nor the U.S. government would have been so helpful to Coleman, to say the least. When a white musician makes a politicized statement about black freedom but a black musician stays silent, it highlights the complex power relations at play in jazz, the workings of privilege even in music that claims “freedom” as its goal, collective improvisation as its method, and creative spontaneity as its spirit.

Much of the work on the avant-garde and race, especially work that focuses on the sixties, pits white critics against black musicians and tends to gloss over the complexities of those who espoused various versions of black nationalism performing with white musicians. Furthermore, black music organizations like the AACM and BAG were devoted exclusively to

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<sup>35</sup> John Litweiler, *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 142-3.

black musicians, but these musicians also played in other avant-garde settings with white musicians. Several members of BAG started an off-shoot called The Human Arts Ensemble, explicitly intended to bring white and black musicians together while maintaining the integrity of BAG as a blacks-only group.<sup>36</sup>

The main difference between these white avant-garde jazz musicians and those in Kansas City is that Rudd and others performed regularly with black avant-garde musicians and even protested with them, while Young and Frizzell have not often played avant-garde jazz with non-white musicians. Their identification with black culture as a mode of rebellion without the bodily presence of black performers can limit opportunities for black musicians to receive the material benefits of that identification—more jobs, wider exposure, recording contracts. White musicians like Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis who identified as black musicians do so in order to rebel against normative whiteness because they claim to feel “out of place” in mainstream white culture and often claim to feel more themselves when playing or listening to black music. These musicians perform a whiteness that reminds us that racial categories, imagined yet tenacious, are not monolithic. Theirs is a weird whiteness that reminds us that whiteness is itself weird, always complex and multifaceted yet always insisting on purity as one of its defining traits. Indeed, weird performances of race by whites and non-whites remind us that the concept of race is weird; it is an ideology with arbitrary and changing rules that nevertheless remains powerful and meaningful. The crucial difference is that whites can always return to normative whiteness; it is much more difficult for African Americans to move through these shifting categories or to even gain the privilege of changing or redefining them. My conception of weird whiteness highlights both the oppressive nature of racialized relationships in improvised music and their simultaneous

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<sup>36</sup> Looker, *Point from Which Creation Begins*, 88-90; Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 118, 96-200.

potential for liberation. The following examination of Kansas City avant-gardist Mark Southerland further demonstrates these complex relationships.

### **Revisionist History and Re-visioning the Future: Mark Southerland, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism**

Mark Southerland is a saxophonist, composer, sculptor, and performance artist based in Kansas City, Missouri. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1968, he studied music composition at the conservatory of the University of Missouri, Kansas City from 1988 to 1991. He has performed in a variety of musical styles and settings. His free jazz trio is called Snuff Jazz and includes a rotating roster of Kansas City-based musicians; a version of that group, Wee Snuff, performs on toy instruments and wears bright costumes. Another group, Flamenco Mio—consisting of Southerland, guitarist Beau Bledsoe and dancer Melinda Hedgorth—recently received a grant to travel to Seville, Spain to perform their unique version of flamenco and to study traditional and modern performances of it. He was a founding member of the jazz/rock/funk group The Malachy Papers with percussionist Mike Dillon, as well as the electronica/dance/jazz group T.J. Dovebelly. He has performed with Kansas City-based musicians Jeff Harshbarger, Brad Cox, Arnold Young, and Bill McKemy among others, and has written for the People's Liberation Big Band of Greater Kansas City. He has also performed with a long list of avant-garde and jazz musicians from outside Kansas City, including Helen Gillet, James Singleton, Skerik, Annie Ellicott, Eugene Chadbourne, Jimmy Carl Black, and Alison Miller. He has collaborated with performance artists Jane Gotch and Laura Frank, fashion designers Peggy Noland and Ari Fish, and visual artists David Ford and Nick Cave. He is

married to visual artist Peregrine Honig, with whom he collaborates on many projects. He currently tours as a full-time member of the jazz/rock group Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey.

When not performing music, Southerland creates “horn sculptures” from pieces of other instruments—usually saxophones or other reed instruments—welded together and made playable. He later designed the sculptures to be worn by models or dancers; they fit around a performer’s body and Southerland plays them. He has used the sculptures in various art installations that he has directed or has collaborated with other artists to perform. He has received numerous awards for his work; he was one of three artists to receive a Generative Performing Artist Award by the Charlotte Street Foundation in Kansas City in 2008. He has featured the horn sculptures in two larger projects, *Urban Noise Camp* in 2008 and *Moonbears and Sisterwives* in 2009. These performances featured improvised music and movement, stage sets, and costuming, tied together by a loose narrative thread. Both pieces received funding from Kansas City arts funding organizations and were performed in small theatres, art galleries, and night clubs in the Kansas City area. I’ll explore these larger pieces in greater detail in Chapter Four, when I look at issues of gender, power, and embodiment in improvisation. The present chapter, while also concerned with these issues, focuses more on race, especially as it pertains to Southerland’s admiration for Sun Ra.

As I mentioned above, the figure of composer, bandleader, keyboardist and philosopher Sun Ra looms over much of Kansas City avant-garde jazz. Although Southerland was not yet old enough to attend Ra’s Kansas City performances in the 1980’s, Ra’s visits to the city are the stuff of legend among young avant-garde players. Southerland’s oeuvre seems more indebted to Ra’s work in the 1970’s than to his 1980’s performances of Fletcher Henderson’s big band music, much of which he performed in Kansas City. The aesthetics of Ra’s 1970’s performances

included brightly colored costumes, electronic and other uncommon musical instruments, free improvisation, dancers and singers (featuring June Tyson), and references to space travel, ancient Egypt, and other planets. Such aspects situated Ra largely outside mainstream jazz, although he is often included in the larger canon today.

Jazz studies scholars became interested in Ra as an artist whose aesthetic and ideas critique the jazz canon and offer ways to open it up to a different historical pattern of black innovation and outsider status.<sup>37</sup> In some ways, he can be seen as the logical result of the ostensible progress of jazz's development, an updating of Duke Ellington's already forward-thinking big band composing and leadership style; but he is also depicted as part of the free jazz movement of the 1960's that "killed jazz." Ellington sought freedom for black people, and his elevation of black culture to equality with white culture was in some ways indebted to and helped shape the larger intellectual and cultural formations of the Harlem Renaissance. His cultural and intellectual work helped pave the way for Ra's equally complex performances of race. He often spoke about black culture as special, separate, and qualitatively better than white culture (and thus from another planet), ideas that seem to be in line with some of the tenets of black nationalism. But his emphasis on discipline and his critique of the idea of freedom is at odds with black nationalism. His statement, as Frizzell overheard it, that slavery was "good for blacks" because it taught them discipline, seems to fall outside most black intellectual streams of thought on freedom and equality (not to mention most white liberal comfort zones). It is this constant "weirdness" that makes Ra a problematic figure in the jazz canon even today; he seems to elude each new configuration of jazz orthodoxy or categorization, following from Duke Ellington's claims that his own music was "beyond category." Even his recreations of Fletcher

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<sup>37</sup> Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*, (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1999).

Henderson's big band arrangements from the 1930's do not quite fit in with dominant jazz history. As Paul Gilroy has argued, artists like Sun Ra seek "another mode of recognition in the most alien identity they can imagine" in order to escape the limited and oppressive identities offered to them by white supremacy and racism.<sup>38</sup>

Southerland compares his own performances to those of Sun Ra, and certainly several aspects of The Urban Noise Camp and Moonbears & Sisterwives recall the sounds and sights of Ra's work: theatrical use of brightly colored costumes; futuristic themes; improvised music; movement and dance; the use of a single female vocalist; homemade, arcane, or non-traditional musical instruments; and electronics. Southerland sees his music as having some of the same effects as Ra's: that is, to help people imagine new ways of being and of relating to each other. Because Southerland calls his music "jazz," he also invites listeners, much like Sun Ra did, to expand the conventions of jazz performance to include costuming, movement, and "weird noises." Both Wald's and Lipsitz's notions of whites crossing racial lines could apply to Southerland, except that Southerland does not claim to cross any lines, pass, or be "infected" by black music. But neither does he deny it. The fact that he claims "Afrofuturism" by name as a philosophical influence does indicate his indebtedness to an idea about race that sees freedom and equality as a goal.

Southerland's role as the leader of Urban Noise Camp also may more closely resemble Sun Ra's leadership model. As John Szwed has described in Ra's biography and members of Ra's band have attested, Ra allowed freedom in his musical performances, but within boundaries that were somewhat flexible and changed with each song. Southerland, too, acts as the leader or director of the Urban Noise Camp, setting up various parameters of the performance—time

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<sup>38</sup> Gilroy, *Against Race*, 348.

length, performance space, theme, mood, overall narrative structure—and allowing the participants room to improvise within those broad parameters. The show’s rehearsals, which he calls “acclimations,” establish the parameters and give the performers an opportunity to improvise together in the costumes and with the sculptures and lights before performing in front of an audience. Southerland identifies himself as the primary “author” of these larger pieces, the one who is “running the show.”<sup>39</sup> He collaborates with visual artists such Honig, Noland, and Fish to set the visual and costume parameters, and in the acclimations musicians and dancers improvise within these parameters to create the whole piece. The notion of acclimating oneself to parameters echoes Sun Ra’s statements about the role of the bandleader as someone who supplies necessary structure through discipline: “Discipline ought to permit people to find the most natural things. Without the base, total freedom is impossible. Everything needs roots.”<sup>40</sup> Thus the bandleader helps establish the roots of the performance upon which the performers try to find freedom. For Southerland, the parameters facilitate improvisation and make it possible; he establishes those broad and flexible parameters for the performers and himself to collectively compose the entire piece through improvisation.

While Southerland’s references to Sun Ra’s aesthetics and ideas about discipline help establish Southerland’s cross-racial imaginary, his references to Ra’s “Afrofuturism” as a specific influence get more to the point. Southerland’s claim is somewhat different from Frizzell’s notion that Ra’s message became more “omniversal” (and far from but related to Young being “perverted by Negro music”). Frizzell’s statement suggests that Ra changed his notions of race to appeal more to his white audience; this would be consistent with other white

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Southerland. Interview with author. June 21, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, 1st Da Capo Press ed., (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 115.

demands that black politics address “universal” issues—that is, white ones. It is possible that Frizzell’s use of the word “omniversal” also suggests more pluralist or cosmopolitan notions of race than just “universal.” Regardless, Southerland’s evocation of Afrofuturism suggests a more overt solidarity with a view of race that acknowledges white privilege in the past and present and suggests that a more just future is possible. No matter who is doing the thinking, Afrofuturism is a way of thinking about black history and culture that counteracts those arbitrary but powerful associations of it with primitivism by turning its gaze away from the past and toward the future, seeing African Americans as crucial to the future. This turn might also work against romanticization of African Americans as hedonistic, sexual, and more physical than whites, an idea that, while it has led some whites to identify with and express solidarity with African Americans, remains oppressive and limiting.

Ra used Afrofuturist science fiction imagery and adopted the newest electronic musical technology at a rapid pace in an overall effort to improve the lives of African Americans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. His performances and writings absorbed the mythologized past of ancient Egypt into African American culture of the present and envisioned a freer future when African Americans mastered technology and outer space. American music scholar Graham Lock refers to Sun Ra’s evocation of mythical pasts and futures as “Astro Black Mythology,” a concept that highlights “the choice that [Ra] saw facing black people—between a ‘real’ world in which they were trapped in a history of slavery and racist dehumanization, or a ‘myth’ world in which black creativity was celebrated from the splendors of ancient Egypt to the spaceways of a future heaven.”<sup>41</sup> To achieve that utopia, Sun Ra said that “the ‘real aim’ of his music [was] to coordinate the minds of people into an intelligent reach for a better world and an intelligent

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<sup>41</sup> Lock, *Blutopia*, 41.

approach to the living future.”<sup>42</sup> Thus for Sun Ra, his music, in which improvisation plays a crucial role, was designed to help listeners imagine new, better futures.

Sun Ra’s use of a concept of time that was both unconventional and critical resulted in a futuristic and “weird” blackness that also challenged present, dominant ideas about race, progress, and culture. As he says in the lyrics to “Somebody Else’s World:”

Somebody else’s idea of somebody else’s world

Is not my idea of things as they are.

Somebody else’s idea of things to come

Need not be the only way

To vision the future.<sup>43</sup>

Sun Ra suggests in these lines that epistemologies of the present and the future, especially the Enlightenment concept of progress, no matter how dominant, are not the only ways to think about time. When African Americans and many other marginalized groups continue to suffer from oppression despite changes in laws, economies, and cultures—Ra’s work argues—Western notions of progress are not valid, and the future will still be dominated by whites. Ra thus attempts to re-vision the future for African Americans by imagining how it might be different, one of the central themes of Afrofuturism.

There is a large body of work dedicated to explore the concepts of Afrofuturism in fiction, film, and music.<sup>44</sup> The term was first used by cultural critic and journalist Mark Dery in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>43</sup> Sun Ra and his Afro Infinity Orchestra, *Somebody Else's World*, vol. 523, *My Brother the Wind, Vol. II* (Saturn Records, 1970), LP.

1994. Dery says that the term connotes “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.”<sup>45</sup> While all of the work on Afrofuturism in some way addresses issues of appropriation, privilege, and power, it does not very often explore the complexities of whites specifically adopting Afrofuturism as an influence. Afrofuturism is anti-racist, or, as J. Griffith Rollefson argues, it exhibits a complex attitude toward race that is neither constructivist nor essentialist. Following from Paul Gilroy’s work on black identity and music, Rollefson argues that Afrofuturism is “anti-anti-essentialist.”<sup>46</sup> So whites who take up Afrofuturism are in some ways championing its critique of racist discourses that depict all blacks as the same. An optimistic view of white appropriation of Afrofuturism would argue that it is also adopting an “anti-anti-essentialist” notion of race that is inherently critical of Western progress and white supremacy. Of course the ethics of such a racial crossing are complex, as this chapter has already explored. The primary problem with this cross-racial imaginary in Afrofuturism is of course, power; Dery hinted at the issue in his original use of the term: “Isn’t the real estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?”<sup>47</sup> If whites already

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<sup>44</sup> Alondra Nelson, ed. "Title." Special issue, *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002); Sherese Francis, "Aker: Futuristically Ancient," accessed May 19. futuristicallyancient.com; Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011); Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>46</sup> Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis."

<sup>47</sup> Dery, "Black to the Future," 180.

“own” collective imaginings of the future, in what ways can whites adopt a different view that sees them giving up some or all of this ownership by respecting and acknowledging non-white ownership? In what ways can whites imagine black future-thinking artists and intellectuals as the possible engineers of a better future? What different visions of the future are necessary for this divestment to happen? These are questions that Southerland’s references to Afrofuturism can help us explore.

One aspect of Afrofuturism with which Southerland has expressed some affinity is its critique of the Western notion of progress. As Rollefson argues, works by Afrofuturist musicians like Sun Ra, Kool Keith, and George Clinton “reflect an oppositionality and an historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism, rationalism, empiricism, logocentrism, and their standard-bearer: white supremacy.”<sup>48</sup> The logic of progress allows some peoples to be labeled primitive and others advanced largely based on concepts of race, and it makes the supposedly organic growth of societies seem inevitable. Several scholars of race have argued that blackness is itself critical of modernity;<sup>49</sup> for Rollefson, this critique is most clearly manifested in Afrofuturist works as a debunking of Western progress and therefore time itself. Black artists, musicians, and writers have argued that they are thus out of step with “time,” and their critiques serve as disruptions of time. For Ra, African Americans seemed not to fit into this time and this place on the planet; this leads him to the belief that they must be from a different time and a different planet. As Rollefson notes, “For Ra, Enlightenment

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<sup>48</sup> Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis," 84.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Moten, *In the Break*; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2005).

rationality, Western progress, and white supremacy are inseparable. They reflect only one narrow vision of the world and therefore could not possibly capture any real truth.”<sup>50</sup>

Southerland’s 2004 piece “A Revisionist Jazz History” gestures toward Afrofuturism disruptions of time. The piece, equal parts big band arrangement, free jazz freak-out, and performance art, was composed for the People’s Liberation Big Band. Its title suggests that other histories of jazz are possible, that the dominant history is in need of reworking. It suggests that this requires not just updating but “re-seeing”—that is, looking at the past differently.

Southerland says that “A Revisionist Jazz History” tries to predict what jazz would sound like if it had begun in the 1960’s with, for instance, the performance captured on John Coltrane’s 1966 album, *Live in Japan*, often cited as the zenith of free jazz. “What if that music had become the standard for jazz today?” he asks.<sup>51</sup> Southerland’s thought experiment is an attempt to look at a possible new future, to reject the inevitability of progress and instead imagine what the future would look like if musical and social priorities had been rearranged in the past. Of course, doing so would mean revising a form of black expression that was vital to African American survival in the past, rewriting a history into which many African Americans struggled to be included. Southerland’s revised history romanticizes black sounds associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements while ignoring the creative, improvised oppositional techniques of black music in previous eras.

Southerland’s speculation conjures a time machine that allows audiences to travel back and forth through time and through several possible pasts and futures. This move resembles Johnny Otis’ use of the same concept. As Lipsitz argues, far from being nostalgia about a supposedly simpler time, Otis revisited the past as a way of “expanding the present, as a means

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<sup>50</sup> Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis."

<sup>51</sup> Southerland interview, 2012.

of summoning into [Otis'] presence talkative ancestors (whether related to him by blood or not) who could help him see where society had been and where it was going."<sup>52</sup> The concept of a time machine is both futuristic and historical (as well as fantastic or imaginative), and it involves a realization of the importance of history and the lived experiences of the past to both the present and future. Southerland's attempts to revisit and revision jazz past—Coltrane in 1966 and Sun Ra in the 1970's—in order to re-see the present and the future may not be possible; the realities of the present always constrain such an idealized move. Thus, Southerland's weird time machine combines a romanticized view of the past with a white fascination for black music. His performances and his ideas about his music ask us to reconsider time based on African American critiques of progress like those found in Afrofuturism, but they also rely on nostalgia, romantic notions of black culture, and white privilege.

For Southerland, this involves telling a different narrative of past, present, and future, one that requires both individual and collective political action. As he explains, "We all rewrite our personal history everyday. We form and reform our narrative to make sense of our lives. The power to apply this to a larger social circle is what compels me. Trying to steer away from propaganda and cover ups, the intent is to inform [and] re-inform."<sup>53</sup> Southerland's repetition and play with the word "form" here suggest not just musicological forms but change, revolution, and revision on a large scale ("social circle"). This change is needed because Western views of time and progress have been characterized by trickery and lies to support dominant ideology, that is, "propaganda and cover-ups." Southerland's music does not critique the Western notion of progress nearly as clearly as Ra's does, but in some ways, Southerland suggests that his performances can help envision how the past, present and future could be different—that is, to

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<sup>52</sup> Lipsitz, *Midnight at the Barrelhouse*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Southerland, Email, September 29 2011.

see difference throughout time. This notion of history resonates with what Ajay Heble argues about Sun Ra's work, that it "might be heard as a condensed historical resounding of the interplay between the constraints of inherited systems of history writing and knowledge production (and their concomitant representations of otherness) and the independence associated with imaginative, future-oriented processes of inquiry."<sup>54</sup> For Heble, Ra's work can be read as a postcolonial critique of Western ideology, an intervention on colonial discourse from "outside the very framework of domination."<sup>55</sup> Southerland, as a dominant subject, benefits from this framework and thus cannot stage the same critique that Ra does, but his adoption of Ra's epistemology of time does allow him to critique the dominant, even from within it. It is significant then that Southerland chooses to cite Afrofuturism specifically as an influence and as important to his view of time. He does not appear to rely on a liberal view of the future—the white-washed, colorblind future where difference is erased. By calling on Afrofuturism, Southerland, by way of Ra, envisions a future where black culture matters to the mainstream, where black epistemologies, creative practices, and visions of the future are celebrated for their difference.

Southerland's romanticization of 1970's Sun Ra and free improvisation, especially when it is used to try to predict better futures, resembles the ways Heble, Lipsitz, and other scholars also tend to romanticize these cultural practices in their own utopian thinking. Southerland's attempt to revise jazz history, similar to much work in improvisation studies, valorizes the avant-garde sounds made during black freedom struggles of the 1960's and 1970's at the expense of dismissing previous black cultural practices as less critical. Furthermore, the stakes for Southerland in revising this history are much lower; if he and other improvisers do not succeed

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<sup>54</sup>Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note*, 125.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

in revising history and changing the future, they still benefit from white dominance. In order for change to occur, whites would have to divest themselves of their privilege, past, present, and future; these cross-racial performances relying on romanticized notions of blackness do not achieve such a divestment.

Southerland has demonstrated that he is at least aware of racial privilege and the history of racial violence through his performances and recording with the Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey (JFJO). He and fellow Kansas City avant-gardist Jeff Harshbarger joined the all white jazz/rock group based in Tulsa, OK, in 2011 for their most recent album, *Race Riot Suite*.<sup>56</sup> The album-length suite mixes tight composition and free-wheeling improvisation with Southerland's tenor and baritone saxophones, Harshbarger's upright bass, and JFJO's piano, drums, and lap steel guitar. The titles of the album and individual movements—"Black Wall Street," "The Burning," "Lost in the Battle for Greenwood,"—recall the tragedy and destruction of the 1921 race riot in Tulsa, in which the Greenwood District, also known as "Black Wall Street," was burned to the ground by local whites and over 6,000 African American residents of Tulsa arrested.<sup>57</sup> Dedicating an album to the riot indicates a willingness on the part of the JFJO to highlight historical moments when whites performed irreparable damage to black homes, businesses, and lives. The album is also a "Revisionist Jazz History," in which jazz-based improvisation is used to revise history, highlighting an event that had been erased and forgotten by white hierarchy in Tulsa and the broader Midwest region. That revision also entails a recognition of white privilege and its concomitant violence on black lives. The piece is directed largely at the band's young, mostly white jamband audience, most of whom may not know about the riots, even if they grew

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<sup>56</sup> Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey, *Race Riot Suite*, 2011. The Royal Potato Family MP3.

<sup>57</sup> James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002).

up in Tulsa. While black audiences may not need to be educated about this historical event as much as white audiences, the *Race Riot Suite* may stand as an expression of solidarity with African Americans and a recognition of complicity with white violence. Southerland's participation in the JFJO thus aligns with his Afrofuturistic interest in revising history in order to re-vision the future.

However, comparing Southerland's work to Ra's becomes more problematic when one considers the racial identities of the performers involved in much of Southerland's work (nearly all of whom identify as white), as well as the history of minstrelsy and other examples of cross-racial performance in the U.S. Throughout this history, when white performers cross imaginary racial lines to adopt black styles, sounds, and ideas, they sometimes do so to rebel against normative whiteness, to become weird. This intersection of weird blackness and weird whiteness, the location of jazz, is fraught with complex and complicated power relations, exploitation, imitation, borrowing, love and theft.

Jazz is often seen in the public imaginary as an ideal space located within multicultural America where power relations based on imagined racial differences disappear or become irrelevant. Such visions of jazz as "America's classical music" elevate it above the conflicts of everyday life, separating it from historical struggles for equality. While crossing imaginary racial lines can be considered common among jazz fans, musicians, and scholars alike, explanations of such crossings have usually relied on monolithic, essentialized notions of both whiteness and blackness as well as an oversimplified black/white binary, while downplaying the power struggles involved in such crossings in favor of discussions of musical "influences" that elide real world inequalities.

However, more recent work in jazz studies and race theory tends to see the cross-racial imaginary in jazz as complex or paradoxical, fraught with exploitation and discrimination on the one hand, and simultaneously containing the potential for solidarity and cooperation on the other. This work in jazz studies challenges ideas of jazz's supposed purity as an art form that somehow transcends concerns of social and economic relations, showing them to be based on what are ultimately historically constructed notions of progress, art, "hipness," gender, and race. Such work also emphasizes the complexity with which musicians form communities across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetic form.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, critical race scholarship has explored the stakes of crossing imaginary racial lines as a performance of "race." Much of this work highlights the power relations of crossings, further arguing that crossing imaginary racial lines can bring about an epistemological shift, offer knowledge of the other, or change the dominant in some way.<sup>59</sup> For instance, George Lewis establishes the musical categories of "Afrological" and "Eurological" to denote how musical practices such as improvisation may retain their cultural and ethnic histories while subverting rigid and discriminatory notions of race. People of any "race" can perform African American music, according to Lewis, without the music losing its sense of history. Lewis sees improvisation as a chance for cross-cultural interaction, where "the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start."<sup>60</sup> Southerland's performance of the cross-racial imaginary, facilitated by improvised

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<sup>58</sup> DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition; Bernard Gendron, "'Moldy Figs' and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942-1946)," in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Monson, "White Hipness."

<sup>59</sup> Gilroy, *Against Race*; Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Iton, *Black Fantastic*; E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003); Moten, *In the Break*; Heike Raphael-Hernandez, *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>60</sup> Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950," 150.

music, might have resulted in just such an internalization. There is a possible danger, for Lewis, in calling some improvised music “experimental” or “avant-garde,” because such an appellation sets white improvisational or “aleatoric” techniques against black improvisation, eliding white privilege in this constructed binary.<sup>61</sup> Southerland’s insistence on calling his music “jazz,” as well as his claims to the “weird noise” of Sun Ra and Afrofuturism as influences, emphasizes his debt to black musical forms and black experiences, making more vivid the power relations in such a move.

Southerland does not often improvise with non-white musicians in this work, however, thus limiting the possibilities of real-time solidarity like those that Lewis suggests. All three musicians I investigate here could demonstrate solidarity simply by hiring non-white musicians or playing more often with non-white performers. Today in Kansas City, this would require a significant amount of work, finding non-white musicians who play avant-garde music; this is due in part to the history of segregation in Kansas City both spatially and musically that I noted in Chapter One. The exception to this case is Southerland’s few performances with trumpeter Hermon Mehari, the son of Eritrean immigrants. Mehari, in his early twenties, performs in a variety of settings, from mainstream jazz standards, to contemporary chord-based jazz, to hip hop and pop covers, to punk, to Southerland’s free jazz group Snuff Jazz. As Mehari notes, “I guess there’s a divide; Mark has no one to hire that’s African American, cause there’s no African Americans here that really play that [avant-garde]. I’m down to play that and I’ve done it in other settings, just not to the extent that Mark does it, as a working band that does it.”<sup>62</sup> Mehari’s observations here echo what white players have also noted—that there simply aren’t many non-white avant-garde musicians in Kansas City (and that there is little history of black avant-

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>62</sup> Mehari interview, 2012.

gardism in Kansas City). Compounding the whiteness of any avant-garde scene in Kansas City, no matter how small, is the fact that much of Southerland's audience is white. As Mehari observes:

I see primarily a white audience, primarily in their 30's. And it's, I think Snuff Jazz is also connected to a scene, a specific, one aspect of the arts scene, through Peregrine [Honig, visual artist and Southerland's wife] and that kind of circle of people. And that circle of people seem really into supporting those events, not just Snuff Jazz but things Peregrine might do, some of the more experimental stuff, that like [arts funding organization] Charlotte Street might support. Which is predominantly white. All white, really.<sup>63</sup>

Mehari here notes that Southerland's avant-garde music comes with an audience predisposed to experimental art, consisting of a group of friends and fellow artists—all young and white—who also receive funding from arts patrons, not just jazz fans.

I argue here that Southerland's cross-racial performances take advantage of white privilege while also offering a critique of that privilege. Southerland performs Afrological music, calling on black forms of improvisation, inhabiting those forms to express a social, aesthetic, and sexual "freedom"; he does so both with and without irony and exploitation, championing black musical expression and social thought and suggesting a possible universality while also relying on the white privilege that facilitates such a move. The performances also rely on Eurological modes of expression such as Dada, Futurism, or other performance art, as well as the social contexts in which such art is found. Southerland's performances can be found in the physical and social spaces traditionally associated with both of Lewis's cultural categories—jazz clubs and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

jam sessions on the one hand and art galleries and fashion shows on the other. His skill at negotiating these two spaces also allows him to benefit materially from both worlds, through jazz (and rock) gigs and arts grants. Expanding the notions of both jazz and performance art may blur or complicate the racial lines along which these modes of expression are thought to exist, opening up material opportunities for jazz musicians of all ethnicities to find audiences and funding in other worlds.

## **Conclusion**

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the cross-racial imaginary involves desire. Arnold Young wants to be “perverted” by black music, Dwight Frizzell wants to disappear into the Black Crack, and Southerland wants to revise jazz history and “snuff out” mainstream jazz. Young’s crossing of the racial imaginary complicates essentialist discourses about race, especially whiteness; his desire to be “infected” by African American culture and to infect others evinces a longing to complicate his own whiteness or to divest himself of white privilege. However, this move also reinscribes the very racist discourse it complicates by relying on an ideal, monolithic, and pure blackness from which whites may appropriate (or steal) in order to make themselves “better whites.” Falling into the Black Crack for Frizzell represents white desires to inhabit alternative black cultural spaces, to make a weird escape from mainstream whiteness through the break of black culture, conceived as low, sexual, bodily, and free. Both Young and Frizzell evince a relationship to blackness common to fellow white liberal members of the Baby Boomer generation in the U.S., especially that of white jazz and avant-garde musicians: they recognize the importance of black culture to American history but rely on a simplistic, limiting, and romanticized notion of blackness that reinscribes racial hierarchies.

Southerland, born somewhat later, uses the concept of Afrofuturism to celebrate black intellectual and creative visions of the future that counteract some of the racist ideologies that Young and Frizzell unwittingly reinforce, but he does so from a position of dominance as a white male. These desires produce critical moves informed by black epistemologies and creative practices that critique essentialized notions of race and assert the inherent dissent of black performances of race. White performances of blackness(es) have the potential to problematize ideologies of race that depict both whiteness and blackness as monolithic, but they can also fall back on those same hierarchies and reinscribe the privilege of the white subjects who perform them.

One way to begin to understand the cross-racial imaginary is to conceive of race as an embodied performance. Racial ideology hinges on spectation, on visual “evidence” of “race”—skin color, facial features, skull shape, body proportions, movement—that change over time but remain fixated on the body. Scholarship on race, embodiment, and performance has also focused on the ways black performances often complicate dominant notions of race. Daphne Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, for instance, studies theatre performers who push against the standards of movement and visual representation for minstrelsy and black melodrama in order to perform a kind of freedom.<sup>64</sup> Embodied performances of race make sound, too—in speech, singing, dance, and instrument playing. The cross-racial imaginary in music—from minstrelsy to hip hop—is often concerned with black “authenticity,” that is, to what extent the white performer is able to “sound black.” Concepts of black sound are nearly always associated in the dominant imagination with emotion, sexuality, and freedom drawn from dominant racial ideology. As George Lewis and others have suggested,

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<sup>64</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

whites embodying black cultural practices, especially through improvisation, have the potential for cross-cultural understanding, solidarity, and community formation.<sup>65</sup>

Much of this work focuses on white and non-white bodies improvising together in various forms, but what of performances like Southerland's of "black sound" by all white groups and in front of nearly all white audiences? In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson argues that such performances retain the same liberatory possibilities as those of whites and non-whites together, but remain problematic. His study of a white Australian choir that sings black American gospel music offers several insights that might apply to Southerland's performances. As the descendants of the white convicts who came to Australia, the members of the choir identify with black music by universalizing the specific, historical struggle that engendered that music. This false equivalency, Johnson points out, ignores the material differences in the two struggles and elides the continued discrimination of Australia's indigenous peoples.

However, Johnson does note that the choir exists as a kind of community. "That sense of community," Johnson argues, "is based less on a superficial connection with black Americans than on the communal feeling stimulated when a group of people come together to share previously unexpressed parts of themselves with one another."<sup>66</sup> While the power of music to create communities of expression is strong, I would argue that that same "communal feeling" is the very thing that allows members of the choir to ignore racial injustice in their own country;

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<sup>65</sup> Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950; Jason Stanyek, "Transmissions of an Interculture: Pan-African Jazz and Intercultural Improvisation," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Mantle Hood, "The Challenge of Bi-Musicality," *Ethnomusicology* 4(1960); John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973); Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, 1st Quill ed., (New York: William Morrow, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 188.

their weird bodily noises produce both solidarity and hierarchy. Performing music does indeed create communities, but communities are not essentially positive or even neutral; any sense of belonging and exclusion can also lead to the forgetting of privilege and difference. However, performing the music of the Other, Johnson asserts, can put the self in closer contact with the Other, allowing for self-reflexivity that would not otherwise be possible. The choir's performance of black gospel music has the potential to "motivate them to join in the Other's struggle for humanity and equality."<sup>67</sup> In a performance of the Other's music, the performers "traverse the world of the Other, glimpse its landscape, and this 'sighting' leaves a lasting imprint on the consciousness of all who experience this symbolic journey."<sup>68</sup> Such performances are not totally transforming, especially in the material sense, however; white performers still benefit from white privilege, even while the performance generated the potential for transformation of that privilege.

Lewis's concepts of Afrological and Eurological musical practices, as well as Johnson's analysis of the complexities of white performances of blackness, provide models for starting to understand white avant-garde jazz musicians who rely on black performance practices and epistemologies. Crossing imaginary racial lines is a performance and often an improvised one. Improvising race, then—borrowing from Danielle Goldman's definition of dance improvisation—means understanding the constraints placed on individual and collective movement by racial ideology and figuring out how to move within those constraints. This performance of race takes place with other performers and in contexts, in front of audiences, in particular times and places. That improvised performance does not always lead to freedom, does not always represent or point to ideal models of social justice or community; It can also result in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 215.

reproduction of hierarchies. Weird bodily noises are improvised critiques of the structures they improvise on, showing how to stretch or widen the constraints or simply pointing them out. In doing so, they also repeat or reinforce those structures, but the potential for transformation remains.

Often, weird bodily noises are improvisations on history, signifying on dominant narratives of the past. Arnold Young in some ways seeks to write himself in to dominant history, Dwight Frizzell to constantly rebel against it, and Mark Southerland to write a new one. All of them improvise other possible histories that sometimes result in reinforcing the dominant narrative that was their starting point and from which they benefit. Their improvised performances of race demonstrate that they are somewhat familiar with the boundaries of whiteness and how they benefit from it, as well as their skilled and not-so-skilled attempts to stretch or open up the constraints, to find ways to move within the boundaries of whiteness that lay bare or give up some of its privilege.

For dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, “the improvised is that which eludes history.”<sup>69</sup> This statement would seem to be at odds with Goldman’s notion that improvisation necessarily happens within constraints; something that eludes history transcends it or gets out of the constraints. But if we consider Foster uses of “history” as another word for the dominant narrative of the past, it might be possible to note how improvisation eludes that dominant discourse in order to critique it. The dominant discourse however also produces its Other, that which helps define and bound the dominant: that is, the dominated. While Foster’s statement seems to replicate the romanticized notion of improvisation, it might also be an articulation of

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, "Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind," in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 4.

improvisation's power to critique structures of domination. And this is what Goldman's sense of improvisation also does—to figure out how to move within constraints is to show how those constraints are not as constraining as they seem, how those constraints create the “tight spaces” of movement, and help shape and define improvisation.

Whether improvisation finds freedom within constraints or eludes them, weird bodily noises reminds us, “Not necessarily.” Sometimes improvisation reinforces the constraints: a saxophonist outlines a chord in eighth notes on the beat, a dancer moves into a plié, a white performer express admiration for black music that relies on racist concepts of blackness, a male performer limits the roles of women in an improvised piece. Weird bodily noises are the sounds made by dominance and resistance rubbing up against each other; they are the sounds of two impulses—the progressive and the regressive or stationary—moving in the opposite direction simultaneously. The cross-racial imaginary is but one area in which weird bodily noises resound.

Studies of improvised performances of the cross-racial imaginary can be expanded by complicating the white/black binary that informs so much work on race, especially in jazz. Other scholarship on race argues from the assumption that complicating the white/black binary inherently complicates racial ideology.<sup>70</sup> For instance, Deborah Wong's work on Asian American musicians is instructive and offers one direction in which to develop further efforts. Wong sees Asian American musical performances as resistant to racial ideology, because she

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<sup>70</sup> Paul Allatson, *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the U.S. National Imaginary*, (Amsterdam ; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2002); Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999); Dorinne Kondo, "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52(2000); Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, *Afroasian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Deborah Anne Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

sees “performance as constructive rather than reflective of social realities.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, she asserts, “when difference of any kind is explored through performance, the result is necessarily performative—that is . . . performing something means making or becoming something.”<sup>72</sup> Thus improvisation can be both performative and critical; but while “performativity is the mechanism for critical newness,” it “may or may not be oppositional.”<sup>73</sup> For the Asian American improvisers in San Francisco she studies in one chapter, racial identity “emerges relationally—either between musicians in performance, or in terms of ethnic and racial bridge building, i.e., the histories behind the bodies that produce [the music].”<sup>74</sup> Extending Wong’s study of improvisation, race, and performance, then, would require analysis not only of musical performances, but also of the social and historical contexts of the performances, as well as the ways those musicians narrate their own musical and social identities.

A complication of racial binaries might also allow a fuller analysis of race in jazz, one that examines the ways that both white and black musicians have represented musical practices of the Middle East and Asia as modes of “freedom” in jazz. White and black musicians have relied on orientalist representations to provide images and sounds of freedom, “exotic” critiques of white culture, modes of spirituality and universalism, and solidarity in world struggles. Jazz musicians have appropriated elements of Middle Eastern and Asian musics, including odd time signatures, scales and melodies common to some Middle Eastern music, chordal structures that blend Western major and minor modes, ragas and sitars and other aspects of Hindustani classical music. This appropriation reached a peak in the 1960’s when whites began adopting various other aspects of the Orient, from spiritual and religious practices, to health, to literature, to

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<sup>71</sup> *Speak It Louder*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

food—what Brian T. Edwards calls “hippie orientalism.”<sup>75</sup> This updated version of Said’s famous critique is a fruitful area to understand Southerland and other whites whose improvised performances borrow both from the 1960’s counterculture and orientalist representations.

Another area to expand the cross-racial imaginary is to overlap its analysis with one of gender and/or of sexuality. An intersectional analysis of the cross-racial imaginary could lead to a fuller discussion of Southerland’s performance practices and their complex relationships along lines of race and gender. Southerland’s evocation of Sun Ra is telling here. While Ra envisioned a new future for black people and enacted it in his band’s disciplined improvisations, he rarely employed women instrumentalists; they were mostly dancers and singers. But one may not describe June Tyson’s creative and charismatic performances as necessarily “limited;” her contributions were a crucial part of Ra’s 1970’s aesthetic. Southerland’s larger works similarly include women as singers and dancers, but rarely as instrumentalists. Vocalist Shay Estes plays an important part in many of these works. Furthermore, Southerland’s use of “wearable horn sculptures” which he places on women’s bodies and plays like an instrument, may seem to represent further restrictions for women. Thus, at the moment that Southerland appropriates black culture to critique the white mainstream, he also seems to reinforce gender hierarchies. However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, the performances of gender in Southerland’s work, much like his performances of race, exemplify a wide range of experiences of gender. While the constraints in the performances change, female and male performers find ways to move within those constraints, creatively improvising gender in the moment.

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<sup>75</sup> Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WEIRD BODIES:

#### GENDER, IMPROVISATION, AND WEARABLE HORN SCULPTURES

*As I sat at the bar, five men walked onto the low stage one at a time and sat down, spread out across the width of the stage and on the floor in front, sitting among six ordinary camping tents lit from the inside. The men began picking up instruments, moving microphones, and adjusting their costumes. I barely recognized the saxophonist and leader, Mark Southerland, in his brightly colored robe, comically large sunglasses, and tight red sparring cap. The other musicians wore similar costumes, all of which accented their large physical presence while hiding their identity. The bassist thanked the audience for coming and announced, "We are Wee Snuff. Welcome to the Urban Noise Camp Moon Ritual." The microphone he spoke into almost disappeared into his hood.*

*The musicians used small percussion or wind instruments to make short, sparse sounds into their microphones, almost in conversation, like crickets in the woods. As they did so, eight women walked on stage wearing shiny Spandex body suits that left only their faces exposed. They began adjusting lights, moving in and out of tents, and whispering to each other.*

*The music changed slowly and subtly. The musicians eventually put down their small instruments and began playing other ones as the sound gradually increased in volume and density. The saxophonist picked up what looked like a soprano saxophone but with a much larger bell that curved up and out; it looked like an instrument from a Dr. Seuss book. He stood up and began playing slow, long tones alternating with short rhythmic motifs. Then, still playing, he approached each musician in turn, aiming his bell toward them briefly, then returned to his spot*

*in the middle of the floor. Two other women in Spandex suits roamed the stage and audience with video and still cameras, documenting the performance.*

*The music continued to change slowly, at times the drummer and bassist establishing a steady, almost funky rhythm, and the whole band seeming to gravitate toward a tonal center. At other times, rhythm and pitch were harder to discern. One woman crawled inside a lighted tent, laid down on her back and began slowly moving her legs in the air, creating strange wobbly shadows visible from the outside of the tent. As in the floor shows of Kansas City's Reno Club in the 1920's or in Sun Ra's 1970's Arkestra performances, women performers were seen but rarely heard.*

*The music continued to build in intensity, with each musician playing gradually louder and faster. The saxophonist walked over to one of the women who was seated in front of a tent, took her by both hands and led her to the front of the stage. He picked up another horn, this one with many more twists and turns, and draped it over her shoulder, so that the bell curved around her breast and projected forward. Standing behind her, he blew into the reeded mouthpiece and manipulated the keys, making high, oboe-like sounds that fluttered in and out of rhythm and pitch. The woman remained still at first as he played, but then she began slowly twisting and turning her hands, moving her shoulders slightly, and swaying her hips from side to side.*

*The musicians slowly gravitated toward a tonal center again in a major key, and the tempo took on a slow but loose feel. One of the women stood at a microphone and sang a song, "Moon Day," as the bassist and saxophonist vocally harmonized with her. The melody was simple and slow, and slightly accented. This part of the performance felt peaceful, and I smiled as I felt it calming me. After several times through the two parts of this melody, the music*

*became more frantic, hurried, and loud; the women moved more quickly about the stage, putting away other items in the tents.*

*Then they each put on large bonnet-type headdresses in neon pink, green, and white, and lined up in front of the stage. The music once again gravitated toward a tonal center but became more rhythmic and with a bit faster, steadier pulse. The woman singer sang another song, “War for the Moon,” with a more aggressive and louder tone..*

*After a few times through this melody, the musicians again increased their volume and intensity to the highest of the whole performance, the drummer bashing at his cymbals and the other musicians playing fast, long, scalar passages and some loud block chords. This sound continued as the women filed out, leaving the stage and disappearing to a back corner of the club. Eventually, the music died down and very slowly faded away to only one or two short notes at a time. There was a long silence before the audience began applauding.*

The preceding describes a performance of the Urban Noise Camp’s Moon Ritual at the Record Bar in Kansas City, Missouri, on November 23, 2008. The Urban Noise Camp is part art installation, part performance art, and part free jazz, led by Mark Southerland, a musician, composer, and sculptor based in Kansas City. This performance included, in addition to Southerland, bassist Jeff Harshbarger, drummer Josh Adams, percussionist Ashley Miller, keyboardist Brad Cox, singer and dancer Shay Estes, camera operators Scott Johnson and Emily Moore, and dancers Laurel Sears, Jade, Peregrine Honig, Rachael McMechin, and Princess Slaya. Chapter Four explores issues of gender, embodiment, and improvisation, using the Urban

Noise Camp, specifically the use of Southerland's "wearable horn sculptures," as a site for that exploration.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: Weird Bodies Moving**

One might say that Southerland is the "author" of this piece—he came up with the initial idea, the narrative thread that runs through the piece, and he constructed the sculptures. But his "composition" consists of general parameters—moods, timbres, particular instruments—and not predetermined chord structures, melodies, or choreography. Southerland himself has said that he composes his pieces in this way to provide opportunities for the performers to improvise, to work out the particulars of the piece in interactive improvisation with each other—among musicians and dancers, and inspired by the costumes and sets. The group rehearsed the piece several times, and Southerland calls these rehearsals "acclimations," suggesting that the performers take time to become accustomed to each other, the sets and costumes, and to the overall form of the piece. In many ways, the piece is written collectively during these acclimations.

However, just because the piece is participatory, communally constructed and improvised does not mean that it constitutes some sort of pure freedom of expression or transcends everyday social relations. On the contrary, the performers in Urban Noise Camp participate in gender power relations in their performance because they also do so in everyday life, with their bodies. This struggle is what the horn sculptures highlight—the ways women are constrained but also the creative, spontaneous ways they figure out how to move within those constraints. The amalgamation of a woman in spandex, Southerland in a robe, and the horn sculpture creates a "weird body," a site to explore issues of improvisation, gender, and intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Southerland's website was helpful providing information, photographs, and sound clips about these and other performances. See Mark Southerland, "Hornsculpture.Com: Documentation of Integrated Art Projects," accessed May 19, 2013. <http://www.hornsculpture.com/>.

In this chapter, I will look at some of the history behind the horn sculpture performances, especially the idea that jazz was “born in brothels.” Southerland’s horn sculptures emphasize the historical links between improvisation, race, gender, and the body; they were first used in “neo-burlesque” shows in Kansas City, similar to the ways early jazz musicians performed in brothels at the turn of the century. While Southerland’s horn sculptures remind us of embodiment and improvisation and point to the physicality of improvisation not just in dance but in sound and the ways that bodies interact and form communities through improvisation, they also point and perhaps reinforce or reproduce ideologies of gender that are themselves focused on bodies. Then I will go on to discuss the “intimate” relationship that develops between Southerland and whomever wears the sculpture, a relationship characterized by pleasure, constraint, and both physical and emotional proximity. If Southerland’s horn sculptures represent intimacy, it need not be about sex; if they represent sexual activity, it need not be about domination; if it be about domination, that domination might be mutually entered into, playful, and temporary.

Informing much of the way I see and hear gender and the body in these performances is the work of dance scholar Danielle Goldman. Her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. For Goldman, the ability to move within both aesthetic and social constraints characterizes dance improvisation:

The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement often relate to aspects of one’s identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality. But a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 10.

Thus, improvisation does not represent transcendence of time and space in order to achieve freedom, as it is often depicted. Instead Goldman argues that it is a spontaneous yet skillful practice that creates freedom of movement here and now, in the material, social, and aesthetic worlds in which bodies move, against the real norms that constrain those bodies. Goldman thus conceives of dance improvisation as a “practice of freedom,” also borrowing from Foucault.

This view of improvisation allows us to consider the specifics of context of performance—what are the confines, the boundaries, the limits, of each performance— aesthetically, ideologically, in time and place? It also allows us to pay close attention to the creative, spontaneous, practiced ways that people sound out those boundaries, become aware of them, and move within them. It focuses us on body and movement—metaphorically, physically, visually, sensually, aurally. It allows for improvisation as an important factor in humans’ capacity to figure out how to move. It is a conception of improvisation that highlights its creativity and spontaneity but also its planned and practiced nature as a skill that is learned. This sense of improvisation applies not only to dance but to music, theatre, and other creative practices where improvisation plays a role. Goldman’s concept of improvisation as a practice of freedom critiques the notion that improvisation transcends the boundaries of social relations, history, even identity. These boundaries in a sense define, structure, and facilitate movement, making improvisation itself possible. Instead, Goldman argues that “one could escape confinement only to enter into or become aware of another set of strictures;” instead, improvisation is characterized by “both flexibility and perpetual readiness” for the constraints that always shape our lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

Also important to my analysis of Urban Noise Camp is Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance. In *Bodies that Matter*, she elaborates on her original conception of performativity that she laid out in *Gender Trouble*. Butler clarifies her concept of the performative dimension of gender as "the forced reiteration of norms."<sup>4</sup> This repetition means that performativity is a process, not a singular event; it is therefore a ritual "reiterated under and through constraint." Constraints on sexuality (sexual norms) are important for Butler; they are not something to be broken down or done away with in order to allow for the "free play" of sexual choice. Rather, constraint is "the very condition of performativity," and "that which impels and sustains performativity."<sup>5</sup> In *Undoing Gender*, she expands the notion of repetition and limit further when she argues that gender is not "automatic or mechanical," but rather "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."<sup>6</sup> Butler's particular way of combining gender performativity with repetition, constraint, and improvisation inform my discussion of the wearable horn sculpture performances as "weird bodies."

Finally, dance scholar Jane C. Desmond's discussion of movement and difference will help me explain the horn sculptures as both representing and embodying social phenomena. For Desmond, detailed analysis of movement can reveal a range of information about identity, social position and culture:

Movement is a primary not secondary 'text'—complex, polysemous, always already meaningful, yet continuously changing. Its articulation signals group affiliation and group differences, whether consciously performed or not. Movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities. It can also be read as a

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

signal of sexual identity, age, and illness or health, as well as various other types of distinctions/descriptions that are applied to individuals or groups, such as ‘sexy.’”<sup>7</sup>

While movement (not just in dance, but in other creative practices and everyday life) “signals” social location, it is not simply a representation of something else. The experience of movement quite often complicates or contradicts what it seems to represent on the surface, but that representation still stands. The wearable horn sculptures might represent the domination of women, but the experience of wearing them and playing them, as I will demonstrate, complicates this representation. The movement of the women in the sculptures signals them as performers, women, and improvisers, for whom social norms of bodily appearance and movement require them to appear “sexy” on stage. The women improvise within the constraints of these gender expectations as they move within the constraints of the horn sculptures’ metal curves.

So in this chapter I look at the practices of freedom that characterize the movements of women wearing Southerland’s horn sculptures. The heavy, constricting, metal sculptures bind and constrain their bodies, restrict their movement, and attract the hetero male gaze. However, they also give the women the opportunity to improvise within those constraints, to find new ways to move (or not move) their bodies in small, subtle, or playful ways. Furthermore, the horn sculptures facilitate intimate relationships between the wearer of the sculpture and Southerland, increasing the physical and emotional proximity of the two performers.

### **Raising a Brow: Art, Sex, and Burlesque in Urban Noise Camp**

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<sup>7</sup>Jane Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 31.

Southerland first began using the horn sculptures in neo-burlesque shows in Kansas City in the early 2000's. During that time, in major cities all over the U.S., a burlesque revival of sorts was occurring with costuming, music, and theatre that recalled burlesque shows from the first half of the twentieth century, and presenting women (or, sometimes, men in drag) performing versions of burlesque dance and strip-teases for a young, middle-class, bohemian audience. Most of these shows featured elaborate, usually homemade, costumes, comedy, live music, and other performative aspects from earlier burlesque. Women who performed in them emphasized these elements in order to distinguish themselves from modern strip acts. They claimed that the burlesque revival was more creative, tasteful, and humorous, and also more self-referential. Claims that burlesque was more "artistic" were also class distinctions, depicting burlesque as a supposedly legitimate art form for middle and upper class patrons, as opposed to supposedly low class strip acts.<sup>8</sup>

Robert C. Allen's book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* remains the definitive history of early burlesque from its origins in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through its development and demise in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His study was published before the burlesque revival of the mid-1990's, but his arguments about its importance remain salient. Early burlesque, like its late-twentieth century counterpart, raised questions about female performance practices, gender, and "the relationship of women onstage to women in the outside, 'real' world,"<sup>9</sup> all questions that neo-burlesque and Southerland's horn sculptures address in some way, as my analysis will show. Studying burlesque is important, therefore, because it "is emblematic

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<sup>8</sup> Clem Bastow, "Bump and Grind Revival," *The Age*, December 9 2005; Mark Caldwell, "The Almost Naked City," *New York Times*, May 18 2008; Amy Sohn, "Teasy Does It," *New York Magazine online*, April 20 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21.

of the way that popular entertainment becomes an arena for ‘acting out’ cultural contradictions and even contestations and is exemplary of the complexities and ambiguities of this process.”<sup>10</sup> The Urban Noise Camp, with its small audiences, limited regional popularity, and funding from arts organizations, may not rightly be called “popular entertainment,” but I argue that it has as much to tell as about the time and place in which it exists as burlesque does about the late 19th century. In fact, many of the performers describe Urban Noise Camp as an attempt to move away from the idea of burlesque as “popular entertainment” and toward “art.” Rather than resolving or transcending the issues of gender, power, and social norms that burlesque highlights, this rhetorical and performative move from entertainment to art exhibits just as much complexity and contradiction as Allen attributes to early burlesque.

Furthermore, Allen uses “horrible prettiness” (borrowed from an early essay on burlesque) to describe burlesque’s “aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque.”<sup>11</sup> His term may just as well describe the weird bodies of Urban Noise Camp, whose attractive and repulsive characteristics arise from both their transgressive or oppositional possibilities and their hierarchical or dominant ones—and especially from the juxtaposition of these two impulses. Allen’s use of “grotesque” also points to burlesque’s emphasis on the body, bodily functions, and non-normative body shapes; this conception also recalls Bakhtin’s celebration of the inherently liberatory aspects of the grotesque during carnival time, an association I discussed in more depth in Chapter Two.

Early burlesque highlighted issues of gender, performance, and the body; the burlesque revival of the 1990’s, also called “neo-burlesque,” addressed similar issues but also sought to position burlesque theoretically and politically. The emergence of neo-burlesque attended a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26.

wider discussion about women's sexual subjectivity that often coalesced around the term "postfeminism."<sup>12</sup> The popular conception of the term is that it describes a rejection of feminism (especially second-wave feminism) because feminism is seen as just as restrictive of women's choices as many forms of patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> Georgie Boucher and Sarah French suggest a more positive—yet still political and theoretical—sense of the term, which is meant to capture a continuing critical engagement with feminist work as well as the ways feminism intersects with other theoretical approaches to identity, such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer theory.<sup>14</sup> These debates about the continued usefulness and importance of second-wave feminism also centered around women's sexual subjectivity. As Boucher and French note:

Recent definitions of postfeminism also emphasize the way in which new and current feminist thinkers are geared toward re-imagining sexiness. This controversial focus has emerged in the wake of postfeminist projects that investigate and celebrate the female sexual subject and the potential erotic pleasure in re-writing stereotypical sexual imagery and identities with a subversive intent.<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes, of course, "rewiring stereotypes" could turn into "reinscribing stereotypes," and it is this play between the continued strength of normative gender and the new creative ways women find to move against those norms that makes this re-examination of sexual subjectivity sometimes "controversial." The women in Southerland's Urban Noise Camp present a range of

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<sup>12</sup> Georgie Boucher and Sarah French, "Postfeminist Pleasure and Politics: Moira Finucane and 'the Burlesque Hour'," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 58 (2011); Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); Claire Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-Burlesque and the Performance of Gender," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 4 (2009); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, (New York: Routledge, 2009); Catherine M. Roach, *Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture*, (New York: Berg, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly," 622.

<sup>14</sup> Boucher and French, "Postfeminist Pleasure and Politics," 194.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

engagements with this ongoing wider discussion, from tacit acceptance to clear critique. But they are all aware of it and saw their performances as participating in that wider discussion.

In Kansas City, the Burly-Q Girlie Crew was one of the most successful neo-burlesque troupes; Southerland performed with this group occasionally in the early 2000's, providing live improvised music for their shows. Laurel Sears, a dancer and performance artist with the Burly-Q Girlie Crew, went on to perform with Urban Noise Camp and other Southerland projects. She recalls that Southerland and his wife, visual artist Peregrine Honig, provided their studio, the Fahrenheit Gallery, as a rehearsal and performance space for one of the shows. The show featured live music, a drag performance, burlesque dancing, and one of the earliest versions of Southerland's horn sculpture:

Yeah it was like the second big show, um, that the Burly Q did at the Fahrenheit Gallery.

[The drag queen] is not a jazz musician, he's a drag performer, but she played a gal in a trombone, and Mark played Peregrine in a horn that he had made, and that was like the first generation one, and that was like a burlesque show, so it was always burlesque oriented at that point. And it wasn't this whole jazz performative event yet, it was more of a jazz-shtick in a burlesque show, and it was a burlesque show that he and Peregrine made possible by providing their performance space. But it involved pasties.<sup>16</sup>

For a show that featured a trombone-playing drag queen, pasties, and burlesque, the horn sculptures seem to fit in to the larger aesthetic, but a heterosexual married couple playing a horn sculpture on stage may have even seemed a bit tame or somewhat heteronormative. The spectacle of a man "playing" a mostly immobile woman may have also appeared strange in a show where norms of gender and sexuality were flouted.

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<sup>16</sup> Laurel Sears. Interview with author. February 8, 2012.

The way these performers narrate the transformation of Southerland's horn sculptures from burlesque to performance art in some ways mirrors the dominant narrative of jazz's gradual shift from accompaniment for sexual activity to a supposedly higher and more respectable form as "art." And like that story of jazz's transformation, it involves not only sound, but other performance aspects like movement, costuming, stage sets, and humor, not to mention issues of space, race, gender, and embodiment. Southerland has said that he was happy that burlesque was "the vehicle that I used to introduce my horn sculptures to the world" because "that's where jazz came from."<sup>17</sup> Here Southerland repeats the oft-heard idea that jazz was "born in brothels."

Jazz performers like Jelly Roll Morton have discussed how their art developed in the opening decade of the twentieth century in the brothels of Storyville in New Orleans, a neighborhood that was defined and policed through concepts of race, gender, and class.<sup>18</sup> Jazz's association with sexuality and the body has lasted through much of its history, from the origins of the word "jazz" in a slang term for male reproductive fluids to associations of jazz dance with sex acts. Kansas City jazz, too, has been associated with "deviance." As Amber Clifford notes, Pendergast-era Kansas City, known as a cradle of jazz and a "wide open" town, was a site of both racial and gender domination, policing, and normativity on the one hand, and transgression, crossing, and passing on the other. It was a time and place where otherness (racial and gender) got mapped onto "vice" or supposedly deviant sexuality, gambling, illegal liquor, and narcotics.

For Clifford, jazz was the soundtrack to these power relations. The segregating effects of real estate development in KANSAS CITY that Gotham describes (and that I discuss in Chapters One and Two) were also what helped form the vice district in KANSAS CITY. Clifford argues:

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<sup>17</sup> Southerland interview, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

While the Pendergast machine may have appeared color blind, Tom Pendergast used the moral geography of racism in the city to both extend his sphere of power and encourage patronage in the jazz scene spaces that he controlled. The zoning of race in the city, inextricably tied to the Pendergast machine, was about the commodification of race, gender and sexuality in the “deviant” zones of the city.<sup>19</sup>

Much like Storyville in New Orleans, Kansas City’s “vice district” reinforced the public’s association of jazz with illicit sex, prostitution, gambling, and other social ills.

Avant-garde jazz musicians have often struggled against this association. Bebop musicians, in their struggle to be considered serious “artists,” often shunned associations of their music with sex and dancing, a rebellion that also was a struggle against normative ideas of race and dominant images of African Americans as hypersexual and more “in touch” with their bodies. Free jazz originator Ornette Coleman often complained that he wanted to stop performing in nightclubs because he no longer wanted his music linked to “whiskey and fucking,”<sup>20</sup> and Lester Bowie has also spoken of how the AACM has struggled to overcome this same stigma.<sup>21</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter Two, this shift in the discourse of jazz-as-entertainment to jazz-as-art entailed a move away from sexuality as well as humor. Dominant discourses of jazz depicted it as a serious, abstract art that somehow transcended sex, entertainment, and the body, but some jazz musicians continued to employ humor as part of their performance, blurring the distinction between entertainment and art.

Many of the performers in Urban Noise Camp are aware of this history, and many of them express skepticism toward over-conceptualizing jazz. They also argue that any art has an

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<sup>19</sup> Clifford, “Queering the Inferno,” 128.

<sup>20</sup> Litweiler, *Ornette Coleman*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Burns, *Jazz*.

element of the body in it, and to ignore elements that evoke sexual desire in any art, past or present, is to leave out the body as crucial to both performing and listening to or watching a performance. Many of them take an irreverent stance toward concepts of “high art,” even as their performances gain support from art communities and arts funding organizations in Kansas City. Their acceptance of the sexuality of the Urban Noise Camp may not necessarily be a privileged stance that ignores black struggles for acceptance as artists and intellectuals; instead, they may reject what Charles Hiroshi Garrett calls the “serious and professional” tone of most contemporary jazz performances today.<sup>22</sup>

Performers in Urban Noise Camp mentioned the humorous potential of Southerland’s music; Sears described it as “jazz-shtick” and Southerland as “wacky jazz.” But as the burlesque shows transformed into Urban Noise Camp performances, Southerland, prompted by visual artist Honig, began to conceive of his work as performance art. This shift meant a change of venues from nightclubs to art galleries. Honig, Southerland, and Sears narrate this shift from burlesque to “art” as an increase in the seriousness of their performances, brought on by the increasing sense of “intimacy” of the horn sculpture performances and decreased direct references to sex of the burlesque shows. Many in the group have described this as a shift from “low brow” popular entertainment of the burlesque revival and toward “high brow” performance art. Sears says about this shift:

I was interested in making really cool costumes for me, performing with other really cool [performers] and having good music and making it so it was an authentic piece of work that I could be proud of and wasn’t just like a titty show. I appreciate the titty show part of it, but one of the jokes that Mark and Peregrine and I would always make is “It’s like

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<sup>22</sup> Garrett, "Humor of Jazz," 66.

high art, it's like low art, it's like midbrow. It's very midbrow. It's not lowbrow, but it's definitely not high brow." It's the kind of show you could bring your mom to because she was a second wave feminist.<sup>23</sup>

As I mentioned, neo-burlesque already in some ways mixed low and high art, blurring the lines between the two. Here Sears seems to say that by doing away with the explicit nudity of burlesque and emphasizing artistic "authenticity," the Urban Noise Camp might appeal more to feminists who would otherwise be critical of "low-brow" burlesque but also be alienated by high-concept "high brow" art.

Sears' claim for "mid-brow" status allows her to deflect typical bourgeois critiques of popular culture as degrading to women and high art as not appealing enough to the average person. In this way, she constructs the Urban Noise Camp audience. On the one hand her statement excludes possibly lower-class audience members who would attend their performances simply to leer at the women; on the other hand, it wards off any upper-class patrons who might be offended by women in spandex suits and horn sculptures. But it is also a good description of the complexity that Urban Noise Camp seems to attempt—a hybrid performance that is ambiguously sexual.

Furthermore, for Sears, this shift to midbrow culture is accompanied by jazz. As a performance artist and classically trained dancer as well as a burlesque performer, she said she wanted to "create something for people to enjoy that is decidedly midbrow-to-lowbrow and stop with the high art shit. I had to . . . embrace that what I was doing was midbrow—that's what jazz is, jazz is midbrow."<sup>24</sup> Sears here articulates the contradictory position that jazz holds in American culture—it is both popular music and high art, or perhaps neither. While these jazz

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<sup>23</sup> Sears interview, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

performances in spandex suits and horn sculptures emphasize the “low” aspects of jazz as dance music and brothel music, their production in art galleries and museums associates it with high art. Urban Noise Camp’s midbrow performance occupies the same weird space that jazz does in American culture, and its use of costumes and sculptures highlights that space.

Not all of the performers in Southerland’s shows came from burlesque, however. For instance, Laura Frank is a performance artist trained in the Grotowski method. Her first performance with Southerland was in the burlesque show at Fahrenheit Gallery. Southerland asked her to perform in it, but, uncomfortable with burlesque’s overt sexuality, she refused to do a strip tease like all of the other female performers. Instead, she sang Nina Simone’s haunting and tragic ballad of unrequited love, “One Gold Ring,” and, inspired by modern burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee and her training in the Grotowski method, spent the entire song removing only one glove. She recognizes the burlesque roots of Southerland’s pieces but also critiques neo-burlesque’s celebration of female sexuality:

And in the burlesque scenes it’s more girly and a more direct use of sexuality, and I think that’s what I always shied away from. I don’t mean to be talking smack on ladies that are good at that and enjoy that, I’ve just never been confident about using that tool in performance. I’ve had a lot of issues with the whole burlesque movement, because it’s feminist but I’m not sure why, because at the end of the night it’s still a bunch of dudes sitting around, but this time the ladies aren’t getting paid.<sup>25</sup>

Her performance of “One Gold Ring” might be seen as of a piece with her critique here of burlesque and her skepticism towards its post-feminist stance. Her performance is a critique of the hetero male gaze that shaped both burlesque and its early 21<sup>st</sup>-century revival. Her removing

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Frank. Interview with author. February 2, 2012. Telephone.

of one glove invites and simultaneously rejects male desire, and her dark song about a woman's tragic and unrequited love for a married man would seem out of place in a show otherwise designed to titillate hetero men. Furthermore, as Frank mentions here, the fact that neo-burlesque saw itself as more "art" than entertainment also meant that many performers were willing to perform for little or no pay, putting any money they made into making new costumes. Frank's willingness to perform with Southerland suggests that, like Sears, she sees a critical difference between his work and burlesque shows.

Perhaps the performances of Urban Noise Camp, for performers and audiences, provide the mostly middle class, white, suburban, young "bohemians" the opportunity to nostalgically return to the wide open days of the Pendergast era, to escape through these racy and raced performances to an alternative space of the city, to rebel against their middle class white upbringing. But it also allows them to express a part of themselves that mainstream white culture in Kansas City does not otherwise speak to, and perhaps it offers them a way to critique that mainstream. Even if this is the case, that expression is fraught with power struggles, including appropriation, privilege, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. If Urban Noise Camp is an attempt to re-sexualize jazz in a new way, to remind listeners and performers that jazz was associated with sexuality, can this be accomplished in a way that does not also return to racial and gender oppression of the past? Such a move would need to retain the understanding that in jazz history, such attempts have also been accompanied by homophobia, violence against women, and racism. Associations of jazz with sexuality in Kansas City have also facilitated the improvisations of power that rezoned neighborhoods, distributed people according to class and race, and then, as Pendergast did, "sell" those vice districts back to the white patrons.

However, the opposite move, dissociating jazz with sex and sexuality, might have negative effects as well. Ignoring sex in jazz might also mean alienating or leaving out of jazz history performers who have been crucial to the development of jazz, such as dancers, comedians, and sex workers. These performers may not be musicians in a strict sense, but they participated in and continue to participate in music as culture. They interacted with musicians socially and creatively, and their work was part of a larger scene of performance, commerce, and creativity where jazz music was heard. Work like Amber Clifford's helps to reclaim these performers as important to jazz history and to view jazz not just as instrumental sound (on recordings and live performances), but as a larger cultural scene where movement, color, costume, set design, and spatial organization may all figure into jazz.

Clifford's work on the Kansas City jazz scene in the 1930's also points out the ways these other performers challenged dominant gender norms. The women in Urban Noise Camp in some ways reproduce gender norms by participating in a performance that may represent male domination, by participating in a performance that emphasizes or even directs the hetero male gaze to particular parts of women's bodies that are outlined, shaped, and emphasized by the horn sculptures' curves. Therefore, their play with sexuality is not as subversive as some of the performances Clifford describes of cross-dressers, dancers, and powerful women sex workers in Pendergast's Kansas City. However, the ways women performers in Urban Noise Camp figure out how to move within their own constraints metaphorically and physically offer ways to examine a range of improvised resistive or subversive performances that, though they may be limited, restricted, and small, nevertheless move against social constraints of gender.

The body suits and horn sculptures in Urban Noise Camp are vestiges of the burlesque shows that retain a sense of play, humor, and exaggeration. The serious aspects of the "mid-

brow” performances of Urban Noise Camp helped translate that humor for high art audiences. That translation is still humorous and body-oriented, but its meanings are more complex and its messages, if any, less overtly sexual. In constructing a “mid-brow” performance that combines “low” humor and entertainment with “high” art concepts, the performers of Urban Noise Camp created a weird performance piece that both reinforces the hetero male gaze and plays with or critiques it and that is often both serious and humorous at once.

### **“A Very Intimate Exchange”: Sex, Art, and Horns**

That awkward juxtaposition of serious tone with a humorous or playful one characterized the first use of the horn sculptures. When Honig first wore one of Southerland’s sculptures in a performance, she remembers experiencing this noticeable shift in tone. The other performances in the show were “cheeky or kitsch—there would be a punch line or a joke,” but their performance was more intimate and serious, perhaps heightened by the fact that it was taking place in their gallery which also served as their home. She felt the audience’s discomfort with this change in tone, “as if they should not actually be watching it, knowing that [she and Southerland] were in love with each other in real life.” She goes on to say that what made the audience uncomfortable was not that it was too sexually overt, but “because it felt private and less entertaining.”<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Honig associates this sense of “privacy” or “intimacy” with being “less entertaining;” this association is crucial to the shift of Southerland’s work away from the bawdy performances of a burlesque show and toward the sober atmosphere of art galleries and black box theatres. Urban Noise Camp and subsequent projects blend this sense of play with a seriousness of purpose, blurring the line between entertainment and art.

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<sup>26</sup> Peregrine Honig. Interview with author. June 21, 2012.

While participants in Urban Noise Camp and other shows sought to distance themselves somewhat from burlesque shows, some aspects of the performance retained burlesque's focus on female sexuality and female bodies—especially the women performers in spandex suits and horn sculptures that wrap around women's necks, shoulders, breasts, hips, and buttocks. It is easy to see how these performances could be interpreted as harmful to women, as exploitative, as representing male domination, and as emphasizing the hetero male gaze. However, as I will discuss below, many of the women performers who experience themselves as objects of hetero male sexual desire in the shows also described the performances as fun, playful, and artistically satisfying. They also describe their creative relationship with Southerland as safe and Southerland himself as loving and trustworthy—even as they acknowledge that the performance's aesthetic derives in part from Southerland's expressed interest—neither entirely aesthetic nor entirely prurient—in female bodies.

I do not intend to deny that the horn sculptures do in fact represent men's domination of women or do actually constrict women's movement, and do so in the service of male creative expression. The woman in the sculpture usually remains still while Southerland plays the instrument wrapped around her. It is also easy to see how a woman in a horn sculpture may take on the role of an instrument played by a man or that the women in spandex body suits are objects of the hetero male gaze. To deny these possibilities would be to ignore a very real aspect of the performance, one possible interpretation of it as domination and objectification of women. I would have to ignore the leering gazes of male audience members toward women in body suits at the performances the RecordBar which I attended.

However, to fully understand the implications of the performance, I argue that we must also understand the experiences of the performers in addition to whatever interpretations

audience members bring to the analysis. As I hope to demonstrate, the women's descriptions of their experiences demonstrate their complex understanding of their positioning as the objects of the male gaze, as improvising performers, and as members of a creative community. They understand the aesthetic and social constraints put on them as performers and as women, and they figure out how to move within those constraints. They are able to see their performances in the horn sculptures as practices of freedom within the constraints of male dominance, the male gaze, and gender norms. The combination a woman improvising movement in the constraints of the horn sculpture with Southerland standing behind her and improvising sound on the horn sculpture forms a weird body that both reproduces gender hierarchies and resists them.

Some of the women performers witnessed the “awkward” moment Honig describes above—wearing a horn sculpture created and played by her husband at a burlesque performance—but many of them described the intimacy between the two performers as aesthetically and emotionally pleasing, not awkward or uncomfortable. Shay Estes, a Kansas City-based jazz singer who also performs with Southerland, described it as “delicate,” “affectionate,” and “intimate.” She also notes the small movements Honig made in the horn sculpture, the minute improvisations in her hands, hips, and arms; and the ways Southerland responded to those movements in his playing. She says that Honig seemed relaxed; as she describes this scene, Estes tilts her head and closes her eyes, perhaps mimicking Honig's movements and recalling her memory of that performance and its bodily effects on her. More emphatically, she goes on to say that “my entire introduction to the horn sculptures existed in this voyeuristic witnessing of a moment that was so tender and so sexual and so intimate that it kind of in a somewhat direct and somewhat indirect way, changed my life.”<sup>27</sup> As a female

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<sup>27</sup> Shay Estes. Interview with author. November 1, 2011.

audience member, she saw something that was both “sexual” and “intimate,” and it affected her deeply. She credits Southerland with introducing her to a wider range of musical styles and improvisational techniques, which she continues to incorporate into her own performances. (Perhaps this is what she means by the horn sculptures “changing her life.”) Southerland approached her about wearing a horn sculpture after they already had been working together for about two years; Estes took this as a sign of Southerland’s trust and comfort with her and an indication of their closeness as musicians. When she wears the sculptures, she notes being better able to “hear the sound” and “feel the vibrations” of Southerland’s playing, an intimate experience. She does all this while also being aware of her role as the “pretty girl” in the performance.<sup>28</sup>

Laurel Sears remembers trying on early versions of the horn sculptures that were quite cumbersome and uncomfortable. One strapped around her left side with a leather strap and buckle and a brass tube hanging on her shoulder. She said she realized that Southerland was continuing to develop them, and he eventually settled on a sculpture that allowed her some more movement and was better fitting. Southerland himself describes these early stages of soldering sculptures and fitting them as the part of his creative process of which he has the least control. He must redesign his sculptures to fit the bodies of the women who wear them. This also means that each one is generally custom-made for particular performers, although they are occasionally worn by others.<sup>29</sup> When asked about this discomfort, Sears takes a more pragmatic approach: “You’re putting on an uncomfortable costume, you just figure out how to do it and sort of move on and it’s uncomfortable. It’s only gonna last four, five, six minutes of your life. It’s not very

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Southerland interview, 2012.

long.”<sup>30</sup> Sears became accustomed to the sculptures enough that she wore them twice while pregnant. While she says she enjoyed participating in Southerland’s performances, she says that ultimately they were not as creatively satisfying to her as her burlesque shows, where she had control over her entire performance. Her pragmatic approach to wearing the horn sculptures belies this dissatisfaction somewhat. While the sculptures do not offer her much opportunity for creative expression, their constraints are limited and temporary, and thus merely to be tolerated.

Another performer, Annie Ellicott, describes the effects of the horn sculptures on her improvisational practice and her interactions with Southerland. Ellicott is a singer based in Tulsa, OK, who performs jazz, musical theatre, and her own original indie pop. She participated in Southerland’s *Moonbears and Sisterwives*, a production similar to *Urban Noise Camp* produced about two years later. She also occasionally performs with Southerland’s free jazz group *Snuff Jazz*, where her wordless vocal improvisation and occasional references to jazz standards mesh well with Southerland’s sound. Like most other performers, Ellicott says the horn sculpture feels heavy, tight, and cumbersome, but it allows her to feel the sonic vibrations of the horn and to hear its sound differently as it emanates from the saxophone bell in the middle of her body. Wearing the horn sculpture prompts a kind of body-centered listening that leads her to hear, feel, and think about improvisation in new ways—ways that are more “present” but that also “put me in a different space.” In this different space, Ellicott says she feels more grounded, brought on by the weight of the horn and the fact that she must stand very still while wearing it.

The intimacy of the performance is heightened by the physical proximity of Southerland, who stands closer to her (or whomever wears the sculpture) than most musicians would on stage or even a small bandstand. As Ellicott elaborates:

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<sup>30</sup> Sears interview, 2012.

So not only am I grounded, but I've got this really big energetic force like three inches behind my back, you know? It's just, it's interesting, because I can feel that we all, you know, we pick up on each other's vibe. Our selves are not limited to our bodies, we're emanating all this subtle information from our bodies, so when we're closer together that makes a difference, too, [than] when we're just across the stage from each other.<sup>31</sup>

Ellicott's description here seems to suggest that she sees the sculptures as much more of a creative aid than as a constraint; the weight and constriction of the sculptures are actually opportunities for her to think and feel differently and to improvise new connections to other performers. In a sense, she, too, "plays" the horn sculpture. This different approach to improvisation can be so transformative for her that it "almost gives me a new identity." This new sense of her improvised self then participates in a "very intimate exchange" with Southerland.<sup>32</sup>

The remarks some of the women performers make about "trusting" Southerland and about the "safe" spaces of his performance pieces further complicates the facile and limited interpretation of the Urban Noise Camp as representing male domination alone. Several of the performers describe him as "non-judgmental"<sup>33</sup> and "generous and sweet and paternal and really fun."<sup>34</sup> Frank also says that

working with Mark is great. He's a very good listener. He wants to know how you're feeling all the time and if you have any ideas, and he's open to ideas. I think he's really open to wiggle around in his process and try different things. And he's always one of the easiest people to work with.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Annie Ellicott. Interview with author. February 15, 2012. Telephone.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sears interview, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Frank interview, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Here Frank use the bodily metaphor of “wiggling” to evoke improvisation, flexibility, and creative openness.

These performers’ comments suggest that they have creative freedom and input into his pieces. They also come amidst others comments that acknowledge Southerland’s hetero male gaze as an aspect of his aesthetic. This comment from Sears is exemplary:

Mark loves beautiful women, and he’s married to a beautiful woman . . . and all the girls who are in his things are beautiful. It’s not a coincidence. He loves to objectify women in the most loving sense, and he allows them to also look right back at the audience and gives them lots of room to do whatever the fuck they want to.<sup>36</sup>

It might be hard to imagine what it means to “objectify women in the most loving sense,” but that evocative phrase is how Sears describes her experience in the performance, while she also notes openness and somewhat hands-off approach. It is an awkward, uncomfortable phrase—a weird phrase—that expresses the sense of trust and affection mentioned above as well as the sense that these performers are aware of themselves as “pretty girls,” as objects of the hetero male gaze, in Southerland’s show. I mentioned the idea of the “male gaze” to Frank, and she responded that, “We encounter that on a daily basis, and you can’t let it bother you. And sometimes it does . . . sometimes you catch your friends or other people staring at the spandex body suits and you’re like well, what can we do?”<sup>37</sup> Here Frank acknowledges that the male gaze is part of everyday life for women. She implies here that her experience dealing with it in everyday life equips her to approach it in her performance, too; she also admits that a performance space is not necessarily devoid of sexual leers or male desire.

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<sup>36</sup> Sears interview, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Frank interview, 2012.

That same juxtaposition of affection and self-reflexivity characterizes the women's comments about their other costumes in many of Southerland's performances, especially the spandex body suits. The suits were created by Kansas City-based fashion designer Peggy Noland and usually cover the whole body, leaving the feet, hands, and face open. They are made in bright solid colors or busy patterns, and many of them have a shiny or metallic look to them. They recall the visual aesthetics of science fiction because they resemble space suits or environmental suits. They also resemble bodysuits or leotards worn by many kinds of dancers, gymnasts, and acrobats. Most of the women I interviewed acknowledged that the suits draw attention to their bodies as objects of desire, but they also commented that the bodysuits fit many different body shapes, not just ones that match socially constructed ideals of beauty. Sears and Southerland both commented on the suits' sense of "androgyny," emphasizing their playfulness and intentionally vague sexual qualities.

Many of the women described the suits as "childlike" and "playful" and wearing them as "fun." Annie Ellicott downplays the sexual overtones of the suits in her description:

Even though they're like these skin-tight body suits, they're also like these strange like sort of playful chastity belts [laughs], because you're just so in there, you know. It's so hard to get 'em off, and every bit of your skin is actually covered up. I realize that a woman wearing a tight body suit is generally like a sexy thing, but when I wear Peggy Noland onesies, I just feel like a kid.<sup>38</sup>

Ellicott's statement that the suit is like a chastity belt suggests that she feels restricted or limited or that her sexuality is being held in check; her body is displayed as the object of sexual desire but that she is denied sexual pleasure. But her description of it as "playful" and of feeling "like a

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<sup>38</sup> Ellicott interview, 2012.

kid” suggests that the suit helps facilitate the ludic atmosphere of the Urban Noise Camp performances, something different than the direction of the hetero male gaze toward female bodies. Ellicott goes on to say that costumes are not actually restricting at all; in fact, the skin-tight spandex facilitates movement: “It’s also a great costume for movement, because there’s nothing restrictive about it. You can move your body any way you want. You don’t have to worry about being exposed or like ripping something.”<sup>39</sup> Ellicott here downplays the sexually explicit aspects of the suits and instead discusses the ways the suits enable her bodily expression.

Thus, while the horn sculptures are uncomfortable and restricting, the bodysuits offer freedom of movement and a sense of play for the women who wear them. The women emphasized the fact that both sculptures and bodysuits offer opportunities to explore improvised movement in new ways, often in community with each other and in an intimate yet improvised and momentary relationship with whomever plays the horn sculpture. They tend to downplay the sexuality of these costumes, instead focusing on their ludic possibilities. In some ways, this is in keeping with the function of dance leotards and bodysuits; rarely are these costumes criticized as being too sexually explicit or revealing in the “high art” worlds of modern dance or ballet. Indeed, many of the women performers stated that Urban Noise Camp performances were safe spaces where any references to sexual desire were merely “cheeky” or “fun,” not exploitative or inviting of violence against them.

The fact that the performers in Urban Noise Camp consider their work “art” does not remove it from issues of sexuality, gender, and the body; nor does its association with neo-burlesque remove any possibility of skilled, creative artistic practices. If we are to recognize the arbitrariness of the high/low culture divide, we should also see how issues of identity and power

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

pervade both sides of it. Furthermore, claiming a special space for the synthesis of high and low, the middle class, or as Southerland, Sears, and others call it, “midbrow,” is also suspect. There is no middle ground that avoids power struggles. The middle might even take on not only the aesthetics of high and low but also the complications and power struggles of both. Many of the performers in Urban Noise Camp, especially the women performers, have demonstrated this complex understanding; their positioning as both performers and audiences members at different times also supports this complex understanding. I don’t intend to deny here the importance of audience interpretation or the role audiences play in producing and circulating meanings, but I would like to argue that any such interpretations can be enhanced by an understanding of the performers’ experience of improvisation. In my work on Urban Noise Camp, my intention is to produce a particular audience that expands its interpretations of improvisation beyond its immediate impact on the senses or emotions, beyond its meanings as a text to be interpreted, and toward the experience of improvisation—an experience that has something to teach us about power, movement, and struggle.

The experience of the performers does not negate those other interpretations, but fills them out. If one possible interpretation of this performance is that women are dominated, how do we proceed when the women’s narratives of that performance do not confirm that interpretation, or confirm it in some instances and not others? I do not mean to claim here that their experience trumps audience interpretation, only that it has the potential to complicate such interpretations. A fuller analysis of performers’ experience requires us to expand that understanding to include not only the “on stage” aspects but the everyday power struggles over gender, race, sexuality—not to mention aesthetics—that occur in performances.

Ultimately, to see the Urban Noise Camp as a representation of male domination is to cast the women in the performance as victims of patriarchy, an interpretation that leaves out any agency on the part of the women performers. Here, Marta Savigliano's work on tango has been helpful. Her study of the art form, *Tango: The Political Economy of Passion*, analyzes women's roles in tango's lyrics, music, and dance, showing them to be in constant motion between subjection and escape or resistance; tango thus demonstrates women's ability to "subvert and negotiate" patriarchy.<sup>40</sup> The women in Urban Noise Camp engage in similar conceptual, if not bodily, movement, subverting and negotiating the performance through improvisation, creating communities with men and each other, engaging in embraces that both constrict and offer intimacy. Savigliano's larger argument about women's agency in tango gets at some of the same issues I see in Urban Noise Camp:

Are these women simply the objects of male domination? I am reluctant to accept a thesis that would explain these facts by stressing men's ability to manipulate women, thus making tango just another example of the perpetuation of patriarchal power. I have, generally speaking, no doubts about men's intentions of manipulating women; my questions are rather about the echoed declaration of their complete success.<sup>41</sup>

It is possible to see Urban Noise camp as an example of men manipulating women, but by observing the women's improvised bodily movement, however grand or small, we can also see that such domination is not always a "complete success."

If our tendency is to ask how it could be possible for women to subject themselves to this domination by participating in the performance, we miss the point; we fail to see or hear or feel

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<sup>40</sup> Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the experience of improvisation these women have. But if we focus simply on their experience of improvisation as one of freedom or transcendence through “high art,” we also ignore their everyday realities of struggle, domination, and agency. What I believe the weird bodies of the Urban Noise Camp highlight is the complexity of performances like these that intertwine real constraints with real resistance, an intertwining that is characteristic of the everyday lives of people. When we take the performers’ words about their own work seriously, what emerges in Urban Noise Camp is an understanding of the possibilities of exploitation and domination in the show, but also a sense of intimacy, trust, and community among the performers. This communal feeling is not one that negates or transcends the sense of exploitation, but one that exists alongside it, simultaneously.

### **Escape and Recapture: Horn Sculptures in Flamenco**

By contrasting their performance in Urban Noise Camp with burlesque, and by denying the possibility of sexual exploitation or voyeurism in their show, these performers, the members of the Urban Noise Camp seek to answer critics who see only male domination in the show. However, they do not deny that the costumes, horn sculptures, and improvising also have to do with pleasure, and sometimes an intimate, interactive pleasure felt in the movement of their bodies in the sculptures and suits. To do so, some of them argue, would be to deny music and dance their bodily pleasures or to ignore bodies altogether. Many of them sought a way to conceptualize their show as foregrounding bodily pleasure and eroticism without exploitation or male domination. This might also result in ignoring or downplaying the power struggles over gender that took place in rehearsals and performances.

Another use of the Southerland's horn sculptures might suggest new ways to analyze these performances, using Savigliano's analysis of tango. The sense of escape and recapture in tango is highlighted in the performances of Southerland's group Flamenco Mio. Although Savigliano's analysis addresses power relations in tango, her theoretical framework can also be applied to other kinds of movement. In addition to Southerland, Flamenco Mio features Kansas City-based guitarist Beau Bledsoe and dancer Melinda Hedgecorth, a Kansas City-area native who was trained, and now resides, in Seville, Spain. Flamenco Mio's performance emphasizes Hedgecorth's expressive strength and agility, Bledsoe's nimble guitar playing, as well as Southerland's inventive melodic improvising on tenor saxophone and horn sculptures, taking on the role of the flamenco singer.

When they use the horn sculpture, Hedgecorth takes the stage wearing it over her dress and stands center stage. Southerland approaches her and, taking the mouthpiece into his mouth, plays a slow, mournful melody over Bledsoe's strumming. Hedgecorth, standing still at first with her hands at her sides, begins to move one of her hands slowly up her body and then extends it out at shoulder level with a flourish of her wrist and fingers. She also very subtly moves her hips along with the swaying music. At the end of this section, Southerland steps back, and as Bledsoe's guitar playing becomes more intense and rhythmic, Hedgecorth dances with the horn sculpture alone, more demonstratively and forcefully, as Southerland retreats to the back of the stage. Hedgecorth finishes her dance and returns to her still position as Southerland again improvises swooping melodies on the horn sculpture. After several passes through this back and forth action, Hedgecorth dances for the last time without Southerland, and with a defiant swoop of her arm, exits the stage, still wearing the horn sculpture.

The formation of this piece required several rehearsals among the three members in which they negotiated the parameters of the piece. Both Southerland and Hedgecorth admit that it took time for him to learn to imitate flamenco singers and for her to move in the horn sculpture. Hedgecorth had to relearn flamenco steps wearing the sculpture in order not to appear restricted or different from traditional flamenco. She said wanted to retain her full expressive capabilities even with the sculpture on. Ultimately she saw these aesthetic and technical challenges as an opportunity to “do something different” with flamenco in performance.<sup>42</sup> Southerland’s participation also saw him taking on less of a role as leader or author and more as collaborator than with Urban Noise Camp. His willingness to learn the phrasing of flamenco singing and Hedgecorth’s willingness to learn how to dance in the horn sculpture is an example of this mutual creativity. Southerland says the collaboration was essential to the piece’s narrative, which emphasized the defiance, escape, and freedom of the performance’s female character.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to her large, bold, sweeping movements in the horn sculpture, Hedgecorth also used small, subtle ones. Mastery of this range of movement is necessary, she argues, in order to interact with the musicians fully. Her description of an intense moment of interaction emphasizes the same issues of pleasure and identity that other performers in the horn sculptures discussed above:

But when [the musicians] are doing something really incredible and really special and therefore I do almost nothing, because there’s really no need for me to do anything, and, and in a way you know I just try to, emphasize like you know yeah what they’re saying without—so I’m there and I’m with them and my you know, energy is radiating from me

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<sup>42</sup> Melinda Hedgecorth. Interview with author. August 15, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Southerland interview, 2012.

because I'm feeling what they're singing or playing but I'm doing very little because, there's no need you know, and that's a really great moment.<sup>44</sup>

Here Hedgecorth effusively narrates an intense and pleasurable moment of interaction, “feeling” the music being played but also “radiating energy” from her body. More significantly, she does not respond in this intense moment with a grand gesture, but by “doing very little.” At other times, she does use bigger gestures and louder footwork, but she chose here to do less. She says she does not improvise in Flamenco Mio except in rehearsal, but her description of interacting with the musicians using creative, spontaneous movement recalls improvised performances.

In this case, the performer chooses to make small movements; she figures out what the constraints of the horn sculptures will be and learns how to move within them. The performance suggests defiance or refusal, but they also indicate interaction and mutual support. These aspects of horn sculpture performances may not be readily apparent in Urban Noise Camp, but Hedgecorth's work in Flamenco Mio other performances might shed light on those women's experiences.

### **Bondage and Pleasure: Other Approaches to Wearable Horn Sculptures**

If the use of the horn sculptures looks like a scene of male domination or oppression, it might also resemble a scene of a different kind: a sadomasochistic scene of bondage and pleasure. Southerland and the women performers described the performances as pleasurable, and this would indicate a consensual exchange of, or play with, power. More importantly for my work, an S/M scene is also a performance of a kind, and an improvised one, whether in a theatre

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<sup>44</sup> Hedgecorth interview, 2011.

or in the privacy of one's own bedroom or dungeon. Indeed, Butler's description of gender as improvisation "within a scene of constraint" would seem to conjure up such a scene of bondage.

Political philosopher Flavia Monceri has addressed issues of power and identity in S/M, arguing that, despite assertions to the contrary, the social positioning of S/M actors outside the S/M scene are just as important to S/M as the ones they negotiate and perform in the scene. Some of Monceri's concerns align with some the larger issues I keep going back to in my own work: the larger social relevance of improvisation and performance; the intertwining or inseparability of the personal, the social and the historical; the workings of power; notions of freedom and constraint.

As Monceri notes, in a typical bondage or S/M scene, the performers set the parameters beforehand—what roles each person will play, what practices and implements will be used, as well as the scene's limits, designating a safe word to set those limits. Within these limits, the participants act out power relations that occur in wider society, usually with a dominant and a subordinate, or a "top" and "bottom." This becomes a dynamic and fluid power exchange, from which "a set of 'rules of the game' emerges which can be implemented, substituted and even reversed at any moment, according to the unfolding of the interaction."<sup>45</sup> For Monceri, S/M can "subvert the socially established patterns of power relations" because it appropriates those relations toward individual sexual pleasure.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, dominant and subordinate roles are not dependent on larger social power relations—women can be dominant and men subordinate, for example. (And same-sex partners complicate the power relations even further.) The establishment of the roles beforehand, as well as the play with these rules during the scene, lends

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<sup>45</sup> Flavia Monceri, "Sadomasochism: Deconstructing through Power," in *Persons and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Reflections*, ed. Allison Moore and Carlo Zuccarini (Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2009), 130.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

S/M its subversive or critical quality for Monceri. I should note here that writers who analyze musical improvisation often ascribe these same qualities to free jazz, for instance—openness, playfulness, fluidity, and social critique.

This freedom to choose identity types and switch or play with them in S/M scenes and in free jazz might indeed represent some kind of critique of the larger society where such choices are limited. However, this freedom to choose does not necessarily hold true beyond the bedroom or the concert stage. Or as Goldman puts it, improvising dancers do not leave their “everyday bodies” at the stage door. The bodies that walk down the street and are marked by dominant perceptions of race, gender, sexuality, class, or ability, are the same bodies that move in a performance. That freedom to shift, change, play with boundaries of identity, for many participants, does not exist in the real world—without consequences.

However, Monceri rightly notes that identity in the “real world” is much more fluid and relational than we tend to think. Someone who is a dominant in one situation may be a subordinate in another, because “the same individual can and does experience different power relations according to different concrete situations.”<sup>47</sup> For instance, in the Urban Noise Camp, Shay Estes is a white, heterosexual, middle class woman and would likewise experience the asymmetrical workings of power in different ways. The social subversion of S/M ends after the scene is over and pleasure is no longer sought, but, as Monceri goes on to argue, it can also remind the practitioners of the fluidity of identity and thus the importance of the social hierarchies that determine them.

Monceri’s analysis of BDSM as complicating who is a “top” and who is a “bottom” in performance has further implications for the use of horn sculptures, especially considering the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 133.

interplay of the body playing the horn sculpture, the body wearing the sculpture, and the sculpture itself. Southerland himself is not entirely “safe” playing the horn sculpture: any large or sudden moves from the dancer in the sculpture also moves the horn’s wood and metal mouthpiece, risking damage to his mouth or face. Instrumentalists often engage in a bodily struggle with their instruments, the least of which for saxophones are equipment malfunctions like split reeds or sticky pads and keys. But in other ways, instrumentalists must reshape their bodies to conform to the instrument’s demands, which can cause pain to mouth, tongue, and other facial muscles, as well as the musculature of fingers, hands, wrists and forearms, not to mention back, shoulders, and abdomen. Brass players’ lips, teeth, and facial muscles often change over time as a result of the constant pressure of a mouthpiece. As an upright and electric bassist myself, I can attest to the pain and muscular struggle involved in playing an instrument. I have sometimes ended an performance feeling pain and strain in my forearms, wrists, and fingers, and in cases of extreme fatigue, a tightening of the nerves in my wrists that cause the ligaments in my fingers to constrict. Bass players are also known to intentionally stretch the gaps between their fingers in order to increase the reach on the fretboard, thus increasing dexterity. Early in my study of the bass, I did this by placing matchbooks sideways in between my fingers, following the advice of my teacher. Kansas City bassist Jeff Harshbarger told me he used a tennis ball placed between his middle and ring fingers.<sup>48</sup> The kind of danger to the performer’s body associated with the horn sculptures goes beyond the usual types of danger and pain that accompany playing an instrument, and it suggests that Southerland does not exert total control over the horn sculpture or the performer. Both the wearer and the player run a certain amount of

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<sup>48</sup> Jeff Harshbarger. Interview with author. February 21, 2012.

risk, but both also benefit and derive pleasure from the intimate interaction between them as facilitated by the horn sculpture.

The sexual, affective, and spatial intimacy highlighted by Urban Noise Camp's horn sculptures is one that characterizes most improvised performances, because improvisation is tied so closely to subjectivity, interaction, and immediacy. Improvisation studies scholar Ellen Waterman offers another way to understand horn sculptures by considering the "erotics" of such improvised encounters, arguing for the saliency of a "feminine erotics." Such an analytic would help account for the variety of subject positions improvisation expresses, as well as the contradictions and power struggles it produces and reproduces. As she argues:

Musical eroticism is not only closely tied to subjectivity but also to the occasion of performance: the production, transmission, and reception of sound by and among musician, instrument, space, and listener that does not presume a unified response, but rather participates in a continuous circulation of power.<sup>49</sup>

This diversified circulation of power would account for the variety of reactions to Urban Noise Camp's visual aesthetic among its performers and its audiences—the accusations of exploitation, the assertion of women's agency, the denial of sexual or erotic content, the critiques of feminism. Waterman's feminist erotics of improvised music offers an open theoretical framework from which to analyze these process and a fruitful site for future work on gender, improvisation, and the body.

Waterman's inclusion of the "instrument" as integral to musical eroticism has significance here for my study of Southerland's wearable horn sculptures. She draws on Pedro

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<sup>49</sup> Ellen Waterman, "Naked Intimacy: Eroticism, Improvisation, and Gender," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique en Improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008): para 15.

Rebelo's investigation of instruments as individual "entities" rather than as standardized, mass-produced and tuned objects. As he argues:

Understanding a musical instrument as an entity suggests that the instrument is defined through cultural implications rather than by its function. Rather than a tool that facilitates music, the instrument is seen as entity that carries its own cultural context. The notion of 'entity' suggests an investigation into uniqueness, distinctiveness and difference.<sup>50</sup>

Waterman and Rebelo, drawing from Georges Bataille's concept of the erotic, both argue that the relationship between a performer and an instrument can be seen as an erotic; the eroticism emerges from the discontinuity between the performer and instrument as differentiated entities. For Waterman, this erotic play characterizes performances of creative improvisation. So the physical struggle between performer and instrument that I mentioned above is not simply self-torture; it is instead characteristic of the erotic struggle between two entities. For Rebelo, this struggle is the intangible state of performance (and of improvised performance, for Waterman); although it is about struggle, "it is a state that manifests engagement [and] participation."<sup>51</sup> The weird bodies created from wearable horn sculptures, by combining relationships among human beings and between human beings and instruments, highlight these notions of erotics and engagement, as well as physical struggle and danger.

This theoretical framework might offer a way to move beyond the misogynist discourse of woman-as-instrument that the horn sculptures seem to highlight at first glance. While the performers cannot escape the constraints of patriarchy that produce such discourse, a feminist erotics of improvisation might help us see how they practice freedom within those constraints by

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<sup>50</sup> Pedro Rebelo, "Haptic Sensation and Instrumental Transgression," *Contemporary Music Review* 25, no. 1 (2006): 29.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

finding ways to move that are pleasurable and offer opportunities to engage with the other entities involved in these performances. This allows a critique of the notion that power is exerted only one way, from male instrumentalist to female dancer.

If an S/M scene is pleasurable, and wearing the horn sculpture is pleasurable, what do we make of the constraints, the displeasure, the discomfort, the oppression, the weight? Waterman's feminist erotics and Monceri's study of S/M might help us to understand the ways constraint can also be pleasurable, how escape and recapture can be an erotic movement. Goldman's notion of skillful improvisation might also be helpful here. A good improviser strives to "be ready" to move—this requires practice and preparation that leads to physical and mental flexibility to move spontaneously and creatively, but also safely. If the improviser is skilled, she can figure out how to move, and that process might prove pleasurable. If S/M plays with pleasure and power, and tango, for Savigliano, plays with passion, perhaps these concepts can help us look for women's agency where it is not so readily found.

### **Conclusion: Small Movements**

Finally, I'd like to suggest one further way to conceptualize movement, expression, and freedom, based on research with the Adaptive Use Musical Instrument (AUMI).<sup>52</sup> The AUMI is a musical software interface that tracks the user's movement with a webcam to trigger sound samples. Developed by composer Pauline Oliveros in collaboration with drummer and occupational therapist Leaf Miller, it was first used in 2007 with children with severe disabilities, allowing them to participate in drum workshops. Because the AUMI tracks even the slightest movement, someone with very little mobility can make electronic drum sounds, play a keyboard,

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<sup>52</sup> "Adaptive Use Musical Instruments: A Deep Listening Institute, Ltd. Application," accessed June 14, 2013. <http://deeplisting.org/site/adaptiveuse>.

or trigger sound effects simply by moving a small part of their body only slightly. Many of the students who use the AUMI are not able to hold or swing a drum stick or beat a drum, but by moving their head side to side slightly, they can play an instrument. The AUMI adapts to the user's ability, rather than expecting the user with a disability to try to adapt to an ablist world.

In my own experience participating in AUMI workshops and playing the AUMI myself, I came to understand the relationship between movement and expression differently: greater mobility did not equate with greater expression. I could move within a very narrow range of my capability while still playing up and down a keyboard or manipulating sampled percussion sounds. Making the bigger, faster motions that my body also permitted did not result in more expressive range, but instead caused the instrument to malfunction because it could no longer track my movements. By moving my body as if I could make only small movements, I came to a greater appreciation of the range of expression possible in these small movements, and I was reminded of the tremendous privilege of having the ability to make large movements in my everyday life. These small movements came to mind when I considered the ways that women in Southerland's horn sculptures moved their wrists, fingers, hips, and shoulders in small and subtle, yet nonetheless expressive, ways.

I don't mean to compare the women wearing horn sculptures who are otherwise able-bodied with those who use the AUMI with disabilities. Instead, I wish suggest a new way of analyzing improvised movement that does not equate degrees of movement with degrees of freedom, but instead focuses on movement within the contexts of its constraints and highlights the creative, spontaneous ways these performers figure out how to move. The idea that greater movement necessarily means greater freedom ends up privileging particular kinds of bodies in a performance, does little to help understand the experience of the performer who barely moves,

and blocks the appreciation and analysis of a performer with a disability who can improvise by using small gestures. But the AUMI can help us understand the creative ways those performers figure out how to move within bodily and social constraints.

To understand the implications of small movements for gender, we can return to Goldman's work on improvisation, constraint, and "tight spaces." For Goldman, "tight spaces" are created by the constraints of social norms and expectations. Those constraints limit and shape how people think, speak, and move, and thus their everyday bodily behavior. Whether it is a horn sculpture, a black box theatre without wheelchair accessibility, or expectations for women performers to be "sexy," constraints limit and thus define identities. Constraints create the space within which bodies move. But some bodies find room within tight spaces to move in different ways that are unexpected, new, spontaneous, and creative. They repeat the constraints, but they repeat them with a difference—they signify on the repetition. They may do this through grand gestures against the norms, thrusting with hand, arm, and shoulder and leaning with the hips; but more often they make minute movements that are barely detectable, lifting a finger or tilting the head. A thorough analysis of improvised movement will look closely for these tiny movements as well as the big gestures, and then explore the experience of moving within the specifics of their constraints.

This mode of analysis allows us to maintain the contradictions of everyday life rather than attempting to solve them or show how a particular performance transcends them. It allows us as scholars to move back and forth between broader historical, social, ideological, and spatial contexts and the details of movements, sound, and words. It is my intention to maintain the contradiction that the performances of the Urban Noise Camp are both a representation of male domination and sexual exploitation on the one hand and an avenue for improvising bodies to

figure out how to move on the other. The horn sculptures form a tight space to creatively practice freedom, where dominant notions of gender can be challenged. The Urban Noise Camp performances are open to both of these interpretations (and many others not noted here). To foreclose one is to cut off its possibilities. To say that it definitively objectifies women might leave out the possibilities of women's agency and the brilliance of their improvisations; and to say that it is only a free, open, improvised space where people can perform gender in any way they want is also to leave out the real power relations in which the performers are situated on stage and off.

## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I analyzed the weird bodily noises produced by white avant-garde jazz musicians, performance artists, and dancers in a historical jazz city in order to understand how they reproduce and challenge racial and gender hierarchies and dominant jazz history. I found evidence of their complex performances of opposition and complicity in the sound and movement of their performances and in their own ideas about their work. My concept of weird bodily noises seeks to warn anyone interested in the oppositional potential of these practices that they may also fall short of their critique, reproducing hierarchies even while they attempt opposition.

The musicians I presented in Chapter One have been left out of studies of avant-garde jazz and the wider history of jazz because both largely ignore local scenes outside of major cities like New York or Chicago. Their weird bodily histories offer the opportunity to expand the definition of “Kansas City Jazz” to include avant-garde sounds, even as they also demonstrate—as constructions of identity through oral narratives—their privileged status as white men moving through the racialized spaces of Kansas City. Listening for their weird bodily noises in history as they resound in Kansas City jazz spaces warns us that their dissonant practices of music against the jazz canon also produced sounds of hierarchy and privilege. The recent performances of the People’s Liberation Big Band of Greater Kansas City and the Top of the Bottoms Mardi Gras Parade moved through some of those same spaces. In Chapter Two, I analyzed their weird bodily noises to demonstrate that improvised performances that promote freedom—freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom from restrictive definitions of jazz—also reinforce constraints. The weird bodily noises of laughter these performances inspire can disrupt

traditional jazz histories but they can also cover up or drown out other voices. In Chapter Three, I showed how crossing imaginary lines of race can make weird bodily noises. These white avant-garde jazz musicians active in Kansas City appropriate, borrow from, and sometimes embody black oppositional practices through improvised music and Afrofuturistic performances. They often use these complex notions of blackness, however, to distance themselves from the white mainstream while failing to forfeit their privilege. The weird bodily noises I analyzed in Chapter Four, made by Mark Southerland playing a horn sculpture wrapped around the body of a dancer, highlight the intimate performances of improvisation that might be pleasurable but still involve constraint, pain, and the reproduction of gender hierarchies.

The study of weird bodily noises in improvisation could be extended through an examination of the ways that dominant forces also improvise. Such an analysis would operate on the assumption that aggrieved communities and dominated classes are not the sole possessors of improvisational skills. Renaissance literature scholar Stephen Greenblatt has examined some of the ways the dominant improvises in his essay "Improvisation and Power." In that essay, he defines improvisation as "the ability to both capitalize on the unforeseen and transform given materials into one's own scenario."<sup>1</sup> His use of the term downplays "the 'spur of the moment' quality of improvisation" in favor of "the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established."<sup>2</sup> His notion that improvisation is actually the result of planning and not as spontaneous as it seems does characterize many explanations of musical improvisation; and his idea that improvisers make the best of a situation that seems nearly inflexible and rigid could also describe the ways jazz musicians improvise over a pre-existing song form.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Improvisation and Power," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

However, what Greenblatt describes here are the insidious ways that improvisation is used to dominate, the ways that dominant groups have the ability to make minor adjustments to their own ideas, philosophies, and structures in order to insinuate themselves into and manipulate the lives of the dominated. His examples of improvisation by Spanish colonizers of the Caribbean and leaders of the Anglican church bear out the ways that those in power can work their way into the ideas and practices of the dominated.

Greenblatt's analysis of improvisation questions the conception of dominance and its hierarchies as rigid, permanent, and fixed—not to mention impersonal and distant. Instead, by considering the ways that the dominant improvises we can begin to see the dynamic struggle between dominance and resistance, the ways that hierarchies shift and change themselves in order to increase their dominance. We also see the ways those hierarchies effect our everyday relationships, the ways we ourselves and others improvise power in social relationships and in creative practices. This brings up some important questions for improvisation studies: what precisely are the structures against which improvisers supposedly perform their creative, spontaneous work? How do those structures also improvise in the moment for their own benefit? How are scholars complicit in improvisations of power? How do improvisations that seem to be practices of freedom actually represent improvisations of power?

Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny uses Greenblatt's ideas to discuss how power improvises with already improvised musical and social practices in the Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans. As he demonstrates, dominant structures in New Orleans were improvised through the founding of neighborhood associations, historic preservation projects, and the construction of an interstate overpass as ways to contain or disperse local, improvised, musical and social practices in the Tremé. Brass band musicians and second line paraders themselves responded by

improvising their repertoire, parade routes, and gathering places. This created “a community in dialogue that is not a peaceful and productive alliance but rather a contested and spontaneous negotiation.”<sup>3</sup> While Sakakeeny demonstrates the specific ways institutions improvised in New Orleans in order to extend their domination and to tighten their constraints, his analysis ultimately falls back on the somewhat romanticized view of oppositional improvised practices that he critiques in improvisation studies. His analysis constructs a simplistic dyad of oppressor/oppressed, in which the former uses improvisation for domination and the latter for dissent. Looking for weird bodily noises could extend this analysis by examining the power relations within what Sakakeeny depicts as the dissenting groups. For instance, prompted by Tucker’s look at limited women’s roles in improvised music, one could examine the weird bodily noises made by brass bands who resist institutional and structural improvisations in New Orleans but also limit the participation of women in their own improvised musical practices.

In my work on Kansas City, it is possible to see the shifting but constant moves to change housing laws, invent sales techniques, and redefine neighborhoods as the dominant improvising. These improvisations move large groups of people in and out of the city center, define neighborhoods according to race and income, invent new language to exclude “undesirable” people, and ultimately find new ways to oppress minorities through the opportunistic manipulation of space. One approach to this work would be to examine how the oppressed in Kansas City improvise within the ever-changing constraints of real estate and housing as a practice of freedom.

Still, Sakakeeny’s examination of the ways dominant groups improvise through changing legal and civic as well as physical structures is an important contribution to improvisation

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<sup>3</sup> Matt Sakakeeny, "Improvising Music and Power at Brass Band Parades in New Orleans' Tremé Neighborhood," in *Society for American Music* (2013), 18.

studies. Further exploration of this concept could help explain the ways that constraints also move in order to somewhat accommodate the moving, improvising bodies they constrain. Institutions become more flexible and hierarchies more open through this process; the mainstream appropriates some aspects of the subordinate in order to dominate more effectively. Sometimes, these changes to hierarchies are the result of the effective oppositional techniques of improvisation; at other times, however, the dominant itself improvises in order to increase its domination. Improvisation studies could extend its project of understanding the importance of improvisation as a social practice by building on the work of Tucker, Goldman, and others—by analyzing the myriad ways improvisation is used as both a “practice of freedom” and a shifting, moving method of constraint.

Improvisation studies has much to offer American studies. Improvisation studies allows for a focus on small, local arts scenes, creative practices funded by arts organizations, and improvisation that might also be considered or otherwise interact with “high art” circles in local communities. American studies’ analyses of popular music are often founded on a definition of “popular” that is somewhat limited to artists (and their fans) whose music already gets wide distribution in popular culture—figures that, though they come from aggrieved groups, also belong to their own canons of popular music in genres like soul, jazz, hip-hop, and pop.<sup>4</sup> These otherwise excellent studies often leave out local practices, underrepresented genres, and weird noises—practices which, though not widespread, deserve scholarly attention because they have as much to say about identity and power as those well-known artists do. Ignoring these artists

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<sup>4</sup> The work of George Lipsitz is exemplary here: George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*, (New York: Verso, 1994); *Footsteps in the Dark; Midnight at the Barrelhouse*. See also Leigh H. Edwards, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

because they haven't sold millions of records reinforces the very power relations that American studies scholarship is meant to critique: the "tyranny of the majority" characteristic of American democracy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Portions of this dissertation were previously published in the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation* and the edited volume *Bodies and Culture: Discourses, Communities, Representations, Performances*. Peter A. Williams, "Review of *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critique en Improvisation* 7, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/1701/2330>; "Weird Bodily Noises: Improvising Race, Gender, and Jazz History," in *Bodies and Culture: Discourses, Communities, Representations, Performances*, ed. Damon Talbott, Marike Janzen, and Christopher E. Forth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). Published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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