

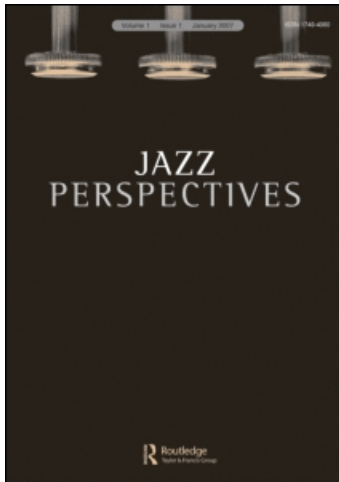
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# Thresholds: Jazz, Improvisation, Heterogeneity, and Politics in Postmodernity

Michael David Székely

## Introduction

John Corbett's 1994 book, *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein*, includes both an ambitious collection of critical writings on music, as well as musician profiles and interviews.<sup>1</sup> Corbett, a performing musician himself (primarily on guitar), frames his approach to postmodernism, and its influence on his work, as such:

For the sake of argument, postmodernism is often cast as cause for a choice: one must take a position "with" or "against" it. This is particularly the case for rhetorical studies, whose very existence is radically reconfigured (its central "figure" called into question) by postmodernism. In the face of postmodern theory, the traditional rhetorical project thus becomes one of recovery, one of preserving the figure of the rhetor, literally *for the sake of argument*. But this assumes that one has a choice, that the figure of the autonomous, semiautonomous, or at least *evident* author is available for questioning ... However, this position itself is now subsumed in the postmodern, which *constitutes* the contemporary "landscape" rather than being one of several particular theoretical and rhetorical analyses of it. Postmodernism is therefore best seen as a set of practices that respond to the condition of postmodernity.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, this statement implies that Corbett inherits a certain skepticism with respect to various truth claims, "meta-narratives," and strict compartmentalization concerning contemporary culture. In the case of this book, this skepticism extends to music in particular. On the other hand, this quotation suggests that he embraces a blurring of the lines between different cultural expressions (music, art, poetry, etc.), and different styles or genres within those expressions. Such a blurring can serve to encourage both a further abundance of expressions and styles, as well as a chance for newer connections to be made between expressions and styles.

Here, Corbett suggests that what is variously called "free jazz," "free improvisation," "improvised jazz," "free music," etc., is exemplary of the possibilities of

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<sup>1</sup> John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

musical postmodernity. (For now, all of these genre terms are assumed to refer to the same basic musical endeavor—that is, a genre and movement essentially begun in the 1960s with the groundbreaking musical innovations of artists like Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Bill Dixon, and Cecil Taylor.) To a great extent, for Corbett, this view entails the project of exploring the critical and theoretical discursive possibilities suggested by this specific improvisational music tradition, which reconfigures our musical experience as both musician-composers and listeners. Corbett follows Jacques Attali in utilizing free jazz as an exemplary case for Attali's notion of "composition." In this term, Attali refers to the return of musical production and distribution to the musician (here a kind of Attalian "composer") him or herself. This is said to be similar to, but not the same as, the free-floating troubadour of the medieval festival.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike Attali, who uses free jazz as a failed example of composition, Corbett seems to pursue free jazz as not just a style of making music, but as also: (1) a broader aesthetic practice in its own right, a sensibility, whereby a variety of musical practices, discourses, and receptions can potentially come into contact with one another, inform one another, and inspire one another; and (2) a critical model of postmodernity, in being a musical exemplar of both the deconstructing impetus of postmodern critique and the utopian skepticism of critical theory. Attali dismissed the free jazz movement as a failure, albeit a valiant one.<sup>4</sup> Strangely enough, however, though radical in scope, the endpoint of Attali's supposedly radical position is remarkably similar to a certain conservative attitude from *within* jazz studies and jazz criticism itself. Timothy S. Murphy has called this latter viewpoint the "curatorial perspective," by which he means a traditional critical stance that not only views bebop to be the culmination and highest achievement of jazz music in its entire history, but which also recognizes "all of the identifiable post-bebop schools of jazz—third stream, free jazz, open form, energy music, free improv[isation], fusion, acid jazz—as deviations or aberrations that, by adopting forbiddingly avant-garde and/or crudely populist performance practices, alienated jazz's mass audience and allowed its place as America's most popular music to be usurped by rock and hip hop."<sup>5</sup> What both Attali's overly economic stance and the curatorial perspective on jazz seem to (intentionally?) overlook is the ability of these post-bebop musics to, at once, blur gaps and spark connections with respect to alternative and marginalized views, discourses, and practices surrounding music.

In the particular case of free jazz, postmodern critical theory—as represented by Corbett—insists upon pressing two key problematics inherited from Attali. First, regardless of its *economic* failure, could it be that the disruption of a repetitive hierarchy (for which Attali himself credits free jazz) is itself nevertheless something of a lasting *political* success? Second, might this disruption have lasting ramifications for

<sup>3</sup>The troubadour is the central musical figure in what Attali called the "sacrificial" economy of music. See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Attali, *Noise*, 138–140.

<sup>5</sup>See Timothy S. Murphy, "Improvisation as Idiomatic, Ethic and Harmolodic," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37 (Spring/Summer 2004): 131.

aesthetic theory and criticism, even for musical practice, whether its impetus is postmodern or popular, modern or classical? The free jazz movement, while it may not have succeeded in achieving complete economic self-determination, did, in fact, succeed in localizing music. Most notably, free jazz returned the creation, distribution, and production of music to the musicians, while also admitting a variety of cross-disciplinary work between music and the other arts, literature, and theory. Such a movement thrives on localizability and communality. In fact, one might argue that free jazz survives precisely because it thrives in a localized, yet flexible, milieu. Of course, this is not unprecedented. Notably, in the seemingly odd context of an excellent essay on hip-hop and dance music, Russell A. Potter nevertheless concurs with Corbett's understanding of free jazz: "Attali's one example of the resistance of a black musical form—the 'free jazz' movement—makes it sound like a last-gasp, isolated failure, rather than, as it was, one of a very long series of moves that aimed at and, in different ways, succeeded in taking black music to the next plateau while the 'industry' was busy reproducing yesterday's sounds."<sup>6</sup> Attali is thus rightly chastised by Corbett and Potter for asserting the failure of free music, not only, it seems, because various musical artists and groups have continued to draw upon some aspects of its basic aesthetic, but on the grounds that—as Potter suggests here—free jazz has had a pervasive influence as a philosophy and cultural politics in its own right. Such a realization becomes that much more significant in the face of what Murphy calls an increasingly "monolithic version of jazz history," in which, for the sake of demarcating a strict musical and historical metanarrative of jazz, one actually runs the risk of replacing any real creative development in the music by "pastiche-driven postmodern jazz."<sup>7</sup>

### The Pragmatics of "Free"

What exactly is entailed in using free jazz in particular, of all possible musics, as an expansive praxeological model for still other musical—as well as social, cultural, and political—practices, discourses, and receptions? For instance, following Corbett, if it is the status of music under the condition of *postmodernity* that we seek (with *heterogeneity* as its most crucial attribute), then why would the music of someone like John Zorn not suffice as an exemplary subject? Although Corbett himself does not reference Zorn much in his work, along with artists like John Cage and Laurie Anderson, among others,<sup>8</sup> I would offer Zorn's music as an *exemplar par excellence* of "postmodern music." I suggest this in part because of his utilization (at least in his most well-known, "signature" music<sup>9</sup>) of what could rightly be called a kind of

<sup>6</sup> Russell A. Potter, "Not the Same: Race, Repetition, and Difference in Hip-Hop and Dance Music," in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*, eds. Andrew Herman, John M. Sloop, and Thomas Swiss (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, "Improvisation as Idiomatic," 132.

<sup>8</sup> In the world of contemporary "alternative pop/rock," we might also think of Björk or Beck.

<sup>9</sup> I am thinking of the *Naked City* recordings of the 1990s in particular. This recording series began with John Zorn, *Naked City*, Elektra/Nonesuch 9-79238-2, 1990, compact disc.

unabashed musical heterogeneity and/or blatant pluralism. Specifically, Zorn draws upon an endless array of genres—and not only in his overall compositional output, but also in his individual compositions. Such compositions will shift from one genre style to the next at the drop of a dime. As Susan McClary aptly describes:

In the case of *Spillane*, [Zorn] draws on jazz of various sorts, blues, and country, all of which he and his ensemble of collaborators simulate with uncanny precision. Their collective virtuosity is far more evident in live concert, for the juxtapositions that sound on recordings like mere splicings are actually performed. On a signal from Zorn, the musicians switch from improvising in the style of one genre to that of another; they hit the ground running without even the slightest hesitation for readjustment.<sup>10</sup>

The umbrella concept for something like Zorn's virtuosic "cookie cutter" playfulness is "pastiche." Pastiche is also Fredric Jameson's designation for all postmodern art, or art in the postmodern age,<sup>11</sup> which McClary aptly translates as "the dizzying mixtures of recycled codes."<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is precisely this "dizzying"—this almost overwhelming presence of varying styles, techniques, genres, etc.—that Jameson, reminiscent of Adorno and his own discussion of "regressive listening," is concerned about because he feels that this quality results in a kind of distracted numbness and passivity.

To some extent, I wish to follow Jameson in his general concern. I too argue that Zorn's brand of pastiche—the split-second and virtuosic alternation of different genres—may actually be too restrictive. What free jazz might provide is an example of how other musical practices, discourses, and receptions might negotiate their own aesthetic and political stakes in the nexus between postmodern skepticism and resistance. On this account, Zorn's pastiche might be too restrictive not necessarily because it is dizzying, but precisely because it is such an emphatic, declarative hammerstroke of "meaning." It could surely be argued that Zorn's various pastiche-oriented offerings are, in fact, borne of a kind of free jazz sensibility—perhaps through their very incorporation of a variety of genres. However, this music's *application* of this sensibility still yields what is precisely a genre-focused display, rather than suggesting a practice that more readily allows for *the translation of musical genre to musical practice* (in the broad sense I have been suggesting). In other words, Zorn's music seems to stop short of a more integrative, relational approach, favoring instead a paradigmatic musical space whose heterogeneity features a more *atomistic* display of difference across individual pockets of music that shift from genre/feel to genre/feel to genre/feel. Of course, this characterization says nothing of the virtuosity

<sup>10</sup> Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 147.

<sup>11</sup> I offer both phrases here because, depending on how one enters into the broad discourse concerning what defines "the postmodern," one cannot assume that these two notions are one and the same. For more on Jameson's thoughts concerning pastiche, see his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1998), 127–144, and in his monumental *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*, 139.

or musicality of the musicians (and it must be said that Zorn always mobilizes nothing but the best), or even our ultimate taste (or distaste) for the music itself. But these concerns are tangential to our evaluation here.

Even so, if we leave pastiche and turn toward free jazz, does there not still remain a fundamental concern that the postulation of such a practice allows for a veritable slippery slope, where all modes of improvisational music would seem possible candidates? After all, I have perhaps already suggested a certain ambiguity concerning what might constitute free jazz. What *is* free jazz? Does *any* spontaneous music-making constitute free jazz? Do we not need to *distinguish* free jazz further in order to posit it as a more expansive critical and creative practice? Would the (now) traditional forms of jazz—i.e., bebop and its various derivatives—not suffice? What about “modern” jazz (e.g., fusion, jazz rock)?

Admittedly, I am less concerned about a slippery slope, which might admit the possibility of other musics than free jazz as far as being able to inspire a critical model of postmodernity. Rather, what is of most concern to me is a resulting condition that would be too restrictive. However, it nevertheless still seems apt to clarify a bit further what it is we mean by “free jazz” or “free improvisation.” Indeed, to complicate things further, these latter two terms actually serve to demarcate both (1) a *broader* category/genre of music that certainly emphasizes improvisation, which we might initially (but not without hesitation) liken to spontaneous creation,<sup>13</sup> and which is often interchangeably called “free music,” “free jazz,” and/or “free improvisation,” and (2) two *distinct* approaches of musical improvisation (i.e., “free jazz” and “free improvisation”) often associated with American and European traditions, respectively. To generalize, American “free jazz” is roughly defined as the legacy and lineage of such innovators as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Miles Davis, Anthony Braxton, Albert Ayler, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and various musicians linked to the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, the Jazz Composers Guild, and others. Not surprisingly, this lineage is largely rooted in African American musics from African rhythms, work songs, field hollers, and the blues, up through the music of such musicians/composers as Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis. Some of this music also came to be peppered with influences from the “classical” avant-garde (e.g., Bela Bartok, Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, etc.). As a drummer myself, I think of the American free jazz tradition in terms of a concept and approach to rhythm, broadly construed, where the work of such drummers as Billy Higgins, Ed Blackwell, Steve McCall, Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, and Hamid Drake comes to mind. Meanwhile, across the European continent, there is the “free improvisation” lineage of Evan Parker, Peter Brötzmann (though he is trickier here as he sounds more closely akin to Albert Ayler much of the time), Derek Bailey, and the saxophonists Mats Gustaffson (Sweden) and Frode Gjerstad (Norway), among others, who are—not surprisingly—largely rooted in European musics and musicians/composers. In many ways, European free

<sup>13</sup> Murphy defines improvisation as “the creation of new sonic structures and relationships in the real time of performance.” See Murphy, “Improvisation as Idiomatic,” 133.

improvisation has historically explored both the limitations and possibilities of an aesthetic that is more closely aligned with chamber or orchestral concert music. Thinking of drummers again, there are European players like Paul Lovens, Paul Lytton, Han Bennink, Eddie Prevost, John Stevens, and Tony Oxley, who have all seemed to focus as much, if not more, on a textural and sonic approach to the drums, often augmenting their kits with auxiliary percussion, “found objects,” and other random noisemakers.

Although even he would not suggest that *all* European improvisers fit this paradigm while *all* American improvisers do not, Derek Bailey has notably distinguished between what he has called “non-idiomatic improvisation” and “idiomatic improvisation.”<sup>14</sup> In Bailey’s view, a music that is “non-idiomatic” is precisely so because it is said to be completely free, spontaneous, not limited by certain conventions, techniques, expectations, etc., as with “idiomatic” music or—more precisely—“idiomatic” musical idioms. However, to the extent that the so-called limitations of other (non-free?) improvised musical expressions (what Bailey calls “idiomatic improvisation”) can also undeniably create and sustain a variety of possibilities, conflicts, resolutions, extensions, and (generally speaking) improvisational sensibilities for performers and listeners, we are forced to question the very distinction Bailey draws. Consider the case of Charlie Parker, an exemplar of bebop, the idiom that is often hailed as the torch-bearer of the jazz tradition (in America at least). When Parker first entered the scene, was his music not received as, to some extent, “non-idiomatic” by listeners? Did not the birth of new compositional forms (e.g., modal jazz) initiated by musicians like Miles Davis and John Coltrane open up most intriguing new musical spaces and horizons for jazz, in which traditional and avant-garde improvisational approaches became intertwined? Though neither pastiche-like (as in Zorn’s music) nor “free” in the same sense as Albert Ayler’s monumental 1964 recording, *Spiritual Unity*, the Miles Davis Quintet’s 1962 album, *Sorcerer*, for example, nevertheless suggests a kind of *liminality* between different jazz currents and musical elements—and thus, a kind of “freedom.” Even today, the music on *Sorcerer* still manages to *assert its own immanence*, or, as musicians might say, its own “sound.” Of course, by “sound” we are not so much referring to either specific examples, or the sum total, of the group’s actual sonic textures—the specific sound of the saxophone, or trumpet, or the bass, etc.—although these obviously do contribute to what I have in mind here. Rather, sound is as much about *affect* in music as it is about sound itself. Indeed, one cannot really talk about a *sonic* experience without simultaneously talking about an *affective* experience. In other words, I am talking about *sonic affect*. But one cannot so easily parse out such an affect. Even if we were to take the example of an individual musician within a larger collective, this notion still holds. Yes, when we speak of Miles Davis’s “sound” on the trumpet, we speak in part of the actual texture and timbre of the physical sound, as well as the way he articulates and phrases his lines and melodies. But we also mean

<sup>14</sup> See Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992).

something else: Davis's affect. This latter quality involves a bricolage of various musical, physical, social, erotic significations that hits us as a rush. Fittingly, I return to a comment of Davis's, which is audible at the start of his 1956 recording of "If I Were a Bell." In a likely response to a request for the title of what he's about to play, Davis exclaims: "I'll play it and tell you what it is later."<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, some musicians also use the term "concept" synonymously with "sound" because music is something conceptual, not so much in an intellectual sense, but precisely in an ontological sense. Hence my initial mention of immanence. By immanence, I wish to suggest that which is affective in terms of how it establishes, creates, explores, and opens up its *own* horizons, rather than that which is effective by measure of what it refers to externally, or transcendently. This quality embodies something that is, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari say, "immanent only to itself."<sup>16</sup> One common way we apprehend and describe certain experiences of music—as both performers and listeners—is with respect to where and how the music "takes" us. What *is* that "taking"? My claim here is that such a question at least begins to suggest the notions of immanence, affectivity, and sound as I have discussed them here. An example of a musical form that seems to occupy a space somewhere between traditional jazz harmony, modal jazz, and the harmolodics of Ornette Coleman,<sup>17</sup> is the recordings of the famous, *Sorcerer*-era Davis Quintet. Here, the sparse, free-floating melodicism of trumpeter Davis and the narrative poetics of saxophonist Wayne Shorter seem to weave in and out of Tony Williams's stop-start, polyrhythmic propulsion. Meanwhile, Ron Carter's bass is an authoritative, yet agile, undercurrent—at once anchoring, following, and initiating—while Herbie Hancock's coloristic and harmonically adventurous splashes on the piano provide yet another expansion of melody, harmony, and rhythm.

In a more specific example, when author John Litweiler discusses the "spontaneous surrealism" of the drumming of Tony Williams (whose work with the famed Miles Davis-led quintets throughout the 1960s is by no means considered "free jazz" or "free drumming"), he seems to accord a certain non-idiomatic (maybe *poly*-idiomatic?) sense to Williams's playing, his use of shifting meters, his extended phrasing, and his immediate (and sometimes disruptive) antiphony.<sup>18</sup> True, Williams was certainly operating in a much different musical context from that of Sunny Murray, the drummer on Ayler's *Spiritual Unity*. As opposed to the much more open-ended melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic concept behind Ayler's aesthetic,

<sup>15</sup> Miles Davis Quintet, *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, Prestige 7129, 1956, LP; reissued as Prestige 61047, 2003, compact disc.

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 45.

<sup>17</sup> For information on Coleman's concept of "harmolodics," see Coleman's website: <http://www.ornettecoleman.com/then.html> (accessed January 8, 2008). As noted at this website, Coleman's "musical system, which he named 'harmolodics,' and now prefers to call 'sound grammar,' is a remarkable exercise in applied democracy. All voices are given equal weight; all musicians are free to make deep individual contributions while listening closely to one another, at once giving and taking space for their respective creativity."

<sup>18</sup> See John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle* (New York: Da Capo, 1984), 117.



Davis's 1960s quintet utilized more preconceived formal structures (at least in terms of using particular melodies, or melodic "heads," as springboards for improvisation) and displayed a more obvious orientation around "swing" rhythms (however elastic and polyrhythmically delivered). In short, these are the very elements that Bailey calls "idiomatic." And yet, once again, it seems that if we apprehend notions of *freedom* and *improvisation* to be intimately bound up with the *opening* of musical possibilities, on all levels—melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textural, timbral, etc.—certain "idiomatic" musics begin to offer similar fruits, for both performer and listener, as that of "non-idiomatic" musics.

I find a curious paradox here. On the one hand, I have always believed that collective improvisation (whether "free jazz" or "free improvisation") has the potential to offer some of the most open, distinctive, and, ideally, democratic creative music available. There is a sense that—because of this music's obvious, deep improvisational nature—every group (and every performer within that group) is going to have something different to offer. If for no other reason, this sense is inherent simply by virtue of the presence of *that* particular group, improvising together, here and now. And those differences are accepted. They matter. Here is at least the beginning of what could be called the political and ethical wager of this music. Not only is there a sense that you cannot step into the same river twice (to use an old metaphor), but rather, the operating sense seems to be that there never *is* a "same river." But then, on the other hand, I have often noticed that many musical groups in this vein end up sounding rather similar. Without meaning to audaciously suggest that there is ever anything completely "new," we might nevertheless think of some general examples where (oddly similar to the more traditional examples of jazz, bebop, etc., that free improvisers like Derek Bailey seem to shun) there is perhaps an aesthetic righteousness at play here that, in drawing its own stark boundaries, ends up risking its own kind of homogeneity. There are many instances of both free jazz and free improvisation in which the music ends up being rather static, despite its intensity, and rather limited, despite its apparently "open" framework.<sup>19</sup> The river no longer matters: everyone begins to step "differently" the same way. By this, I mean difference as a repetition of the same, as well as a resultant dulling of affect. If nothing else, what Zorn's pastiche does accomplish, to some degree, is avoiding this very trap.

But what then of our search for heterogeneity? In Zorn, the explosion of genres, though it may assert a kind of ready-made pluralism, still does not guarantee heterogeneity. Heterogeneity in music need not be obvious—e.g., Zorn's blatant assault of different genre styles in one composition. Rather, heterogeneity in music might entail something more immanent, implied, suggestive, or even quite simply, something which is *allowed for* (as opposed to overstated or restrictive). This latter possibility notably suggests, in turn, that the listener would be intimately linked to the translation of this heterogeneity into social and political affect in terms of

<sup>19</sup> Despite its aesthetic merits, the tendency of much recent free jazz toward consistently loud—and thus virtually dynamic-less—"energy" music comes to mind here.

performing his or her own meaning. Zorn's pastiche, parodic though it may be, hands the listener referent and meaning, or at least provides a willful nudge toward clever interpretation. We learned above how even the more so-called "traditional" forms of jazz may, in fact, exhibit complex structural content, which builds form out of formlessness, as well as spontaneous improvisation out of momentary tensions and releases.<sup>20</sup> Here, I might still wish to suggest (in sympathy with Bailey) that, at its best, more collective and open forms of improvised music have the potential to exemplify these attributes just described, *but to an even greater degree*. But, alas, neither traditional nor modern jazz with free improvisation are necessarily focused on the demonstration of genre styles as in Zorn's music. In fact, Zorn's music is unique in this quality. It certainly impresses, and for that it should be praised. But consider instead the rhizomatic, yet extremely subdued, flow and coloristic textures of much of trumpeter Bill Dixon's music, which initiates—by demonstrating—a creative and experimental engagement that is, at once, its politics, its ethics, and its erotics. In listening to Dixon, one thinks more in terms of what the music *allows* the performer and listener, instead of what it *gives* them.<sup>21</sup> Here, ironically, Zorn's "hyperrepresentational" pastiche music may thus be less politically engaged than free jazz, even though it is far more referential.

Perhaps much of this discussion exposes what may be the faulty association—a kind of social realist residual—that social and political import is best conveyed artistically through concretization of medium to message, through representation tethered to intention. So, in returning yet again to Jameson's concern that the "dizzying" effect of pastiche (which he seems to attribute to all postmodern art) results in social and political numbness, and is thus regressive, we still find that this claim is not unwarranted. In my view, however, Zorn's music need not be ultimately regressive, but I do appreciate the awareness that Jameson's critical skepticism arouses.

Even in the recent music of someone like DJ Spooky—a music that might, in some way, bear more of a resemblance to Zorn's pastiche than most of our musical examples thus far—we nevertheless still find more of an emphasis on the subtle shifts and turns in the music, as well as the intensive relationship between smoothness and striation. The *All Music Guide* review of DJ Spooky's 2002 album, *Optometry*, begins with the caveat that "*Optometry* is fully a DJ outing and fully a jazz record."<sup>22</sup> And

<sup>20</sup> It is with these fundamental attributes in mind that I have not discussed the issue of popular music here, which, I trust the reader will discern, does not exhibit qualities of improvisation and formlessness, at least in the kind of meta-structural way that some jazz does. However, it cannot be overemphasized that I am concerned here with a musical model for discourse, criticism, and reception. The social and political impact of popular music, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter, and one worth shedding some light on. I have made my own attempt in an essay titled "Pushing the Popular, or Toward a Compositional Popular Aesthetics," *Popular Music and Society* 29 (2006): 91–108.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the following recording by Bill Dixon: *November 1981*, Soul Note SN103738, 1981, LP, reissued as Soul Note 121038, 1993, compact disc; *Son of Sisyphus*, Soul Note 1138, 1988, LP, reissued as Soul Note 121138, 1993, compact disc; and both *Vade Mecum*, Soul Note 121208, 1993, compact disc, and *Vade Mecum II*, Soul Note 121211, 1997, compact disc.

<sup>22</sup> DJ Spooky, *Optometry*, Thirsty Ear 57121, 2002, compact disc. Thom Jurek, "Optometry, DJ Spooky," a review from the *All Music Guide* website. <http://wc05.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:gfixqw0ld0e> (accessed January 8, 2008).

yet, within this framework of jazz, the review goes on to speak of one track as moving from “abstract arpeggiatic saxophone striations ... to phat, dirty, nasty synth lines,” while the bassist “pops and bows his bass to stay alongside the bottom end of the groove for a particularly disorienting effect.” And, in summary, the review remarks: “Riff, vamp, timbral fractures, lyrical tension, splintered harmonics, and a constant, seductive sense of groove permeate this jazz album, opening up a door onto a brave new future for a free jazz with soul.” What DJ Spooky and other improvisers *do* posit is a heterogeneity that at least begins to challenge those critics (including musicians and composers) who have said that improvised music is limited by its emphasis on individual style and subjective whim, often resulting in a musical expression that is abstract and inaccessible.

### Improvising the Impossible

In her excellent essay, “Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event,” Sara Ramshaw recently explored (via an engagement with the ideas of the French philosopher) various notions and claims as to the supposed singularity—here, a kind of pure freedom not beholden to certain laws, structures, predeterminations, etc.—of jazz improvisation, i.e., “free jazz.”<sup>23</sup> She begins this article with reference to a most intriguing meeting between Derrida and Ornette Coleman in 1997, where, during a performance, Coleman invited Derrida to join him on stage for an improvisation. Apparently, and (many of us might feel) unfortunately, Derrida was driven off the stage by dissatisfied audience members. Ramshaw seems to take this incident as somewhat exemplary of what she sees as the key issue expressed in her essay’s title. Despite the very powerful presence of Coleman, and with him the notion of jazz/improvisation as being free from the very “background” of jazz (a tradition that demonstrates certain norms, patterns, clichés, phrasings, and repertoire), the figure of Derrida/deconstruction speaks to the question “as to whether jazz improvisation can actually transgress or ignore” that background.<sup>24</sup> In other words, can there truly be—even in the case of this supposedly non-idiomatic music, as Bailey would call it—pure, spontaneous invention? Even though Derrida never wrote much about music at all (though he apparently loved jazz), Ramshaw argues that Derrida’s thought, “when applied to the critical study of jazz improvisation, confront[s] the prevailing understanding of improvisation as sheer spontaneity and thereby challenge[s] its exaltation in jazz.”<sup>25</sup>

A student of academic jazz education at one time myself, I remember that the phrase “jazz is freedom” was tossed around countless times as though this conceit was common and simple knowledge. It was obvious, apparently, that jazz was

<sup>23</sup> See Sara Ramshaw, “Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 2 (2006): 1–19. This essay is available in PDF form online at <http://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/issue/view/25> (accessed January 8, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

freedom. If you did not understand this simple fact, then you never would understand. Ramshaw notably references a famous quotation from Louis Armstrong along these same lines. And, of course, the essence of jazz's freedom is said to be (in) its improvisation. However, speculates Ramshaw, "to equate jazz so fully and inevitably with improvisation is not without its problems. Not the least of which is the impoverished view, dominating the West, regarding the techniques of improvisation."<sup>26</sup> By this, Ramshaw is referring to the lay notion of improvisers simply playing whatever comes to mind, a kind of naïve, innocent, "anything goes" kind of approach, usually received as being devoid of any sustained musicality, musical development, compositional sense. Even with Charlie Parker and the bebop that is the modern precursor to further experiments by people like Coleman in the 1960s, the music—developed in large part through after-hours jam sessions, themselves microcosms of a kind of lawless, free, unencumbered ideal—was initially considered "wild," "transgressive," "mysterious." In more stark terms, which are by no means either new or without problems, the more emotional, passionate, libidinal, "low" art of jazz is frequently contrasted with the purportedly more intellectual, rational, controlled, "high" art of European classical music. This clichéd dialectical opposition places jazz, and its emphasis on improvisation, in a rather precarious position as far as its critical reception is concerned. On the one hand, it seems that if, in fact, jazz retains a degree of mystery and passion, or the perhaps overused "expression," why should this not be grounds enough to *celebrate* the music? On the other hand, if, as we want to say, jazz is not only a music of mystery and passion, but also of great musicality, complexity, technique, style, and design, to what extent does/should it need to assert itself as such in order to be legitimated in Euro-American cultural hierarchies? As Ramshaw states:

A tension consequently exists between the "spontaneous" conception of jazz improvisation and the more context-driven model. This tension is intrinsic to jazz improvisation itself. Improvisation can be neither purely spontaneous nor completely determined by the musical structures with which it engages. It must be both responsive to otherness *and* have some stable or determined dimension in order to endure *as* jazz improvisation.<sup>27</sup>

In Western philosophy, I think of the deeply-rooted emphases on reason and rationality, on the clear and distinct Cartesian coordinates between self and/over other, subject and/over object, mind and/over body. But then, this line of thinking raises challenges to such a dualist and hierarchical ontology, perhaps beginning with Nietzsche's Dionysian challenge to the detached contemplation of the Apollonian and traceable through more contemporary poststructuralist and postmodernist currents. Yet one might still ask to what extent Western philosophy is still beholden to reason, to what extent it is still legitimating itself in terms of reason, even if it has come to challenge reason on many grounds.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

Through a provocative overall discussion that explores the similarities between the status of jazz improvisation and the status of law, the notion of music as language, Derrida and music, and the “mystical foundation” of jazz, among other themes, Ramshaw comes to “insist on the possibility of a Derridean critique of jazz improvisation.”<sup>28</sup> Such a position entails what she calls “the necessity of improvisation’s impossibility.”<sup>29</sup> What is impossible? Precisely the notion of jazz improvisation as “true invention”—i.e., Bailey’s “non-idiomatic improvisation,” or what we have more generally called freedom, pure spontaneity, etc. Invention, says Ramshaw (following Derrida), naturally breaks with convention, but it must do so in such a way as to engage—even through transgression—“that from which it comes.”<sup>30</sup> “‘True’ invention,” she continues, “or what Derrida calls the ‘invention of the other,’ is impossible because there can be no invention ‘without a prevailing statutory context.’ Stated differently, invention exists solely on the condition that it transgresses the ‘status’ with which it is supposed to comply.”<sup>31</sup> And, finally, Ramshaw contends that “invention thus needs to *be with* law in order to *be* inventive.”<sup>32</sup>

In one sense, then, it seems that Ramshaw’s Derridean view of jazz improvisation culminates in a negative critique, which is to say that it demonstrates what jazz improvisation *cannot* do, what it *cannot* be, and how its claim to singularity is “impossible.” In another sense, however—and the more important sense, I believe—there is, as Ramshaw attests, a much deeper and more nuanced notion of “the impossible,” in which it can, by virtue of its impossibility, actually “release” and “support” possibility.<sup>33</sup> Ramshaw associates this idea with Derrida’s *différance*, with the play of differences. Differently put, only what is “impossible” can hold out for hope, for connection, without the risk of being hindered, constrained, and subsumed. In the context of this overall discussion, then, we now come to perhaps a slightly more nuanced account of Bailey’s non-idiomatic “free improvisation.” We return to the idea that, though perhaps necessarily failing in its attempt to be an isolated practice that is truly inventive and wholly original, improvisation, when cast more broadly, can thus *affirm* more broadly. *Différance* (as per Derrida) becomes, as Timothy S. Murphy states, “a singular experiment, the injection of difference into a performance. As such it can succeed or fail.”<sup>34</sup> Of course, Murphy is referring precisely to non-idiomatic improvisation in particular here, and thus, in one sense, he upholds both the very notion of improvisation and Bailey’s distinction of “improvisations” about which Derrida, Ramshaw, and I are concerned. However, it is also quite clear that Murphy apprehends non-idiomatic improvisation as, in fact,

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Quoting from Derrida’s “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, trans. Catherine Porter, eds. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 25–65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, “Improvisation as Idiomatic,” 136.

more of a practice, a creative musical approach, rather than a genre. Here, what non-idiomatic improvisation offers is a sensibility immanent to present challenges of/in the music rather than being tethered to a “range of choices [that] is a pre-determined array dominated by a retrospective temporality.”<sup>35</sup> In this sense, Murphy echoes what we have discussed in terms of the legacy of so-called “idiomatic” improvisation, where the emergence of Charlie Parker and bebop, for example, occupied its own non-idiomatic moment within jazz. According to Murphy, “each of the idiomatic sub-genres within jazz, including the ones now privileged by curatorial aesthetics as its high point and essential models [e.g., bebop], originally took shape as a non-idiomatic approach, as an error” (that is, an “error” from a detractor’s point of view).<sup>36</sup> Here, what we referred to earlier (in the context of Corbett’s work as free jazz’s utopian *and* postmodern potential) is actually, and ironically, equally true for bebop. But, adds Murphy, bebop’s “transgression” has been “recuperated.” Hence the wager of the “post-bebop innovators, who have never allowed themselves to cling to a stable form. In foregrounding the process of deviation, they forgo the possibility of stabilization.”<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps then it is better to speak of *improvisationality* in terms of what we might wish to say about a musical address to postmodernity, thus leaving behind “postmodern music” and moving toward a broader, more open heading that reaches beyond the limitations of genre and “stabilization.” As resisting (but not necessarily eliminating) markers like genre and referentiality, improvisationality is not so much ahistorical and acontextual as it is precisely consumed by its history and context—be it social, political, cultural, ecological, artistic. So, too, does improvisationality lend itself more to both a sense of immediacy *and* displacement, blurring, and dehierarchization—in other words, improvisation as rupture *and* connection. But here we also leave behind, to some extent, the moniker of “improvisation” itself, resisting the attempt to offer it—or, even its more specific derivations of “jazz,” or “free jazz,” or “free improvisation”—as a superior musical genre.<sup>38</sup> Rather, as Jeremy Gilbert, following Deleuze and Guattari, states: “All musics possess an improvisational dimension, which is to say a rhizomatic moment at which connections are made between musics, subjects, and non-musical machines.”<sup>39</sup> Bebop as the postmodern moment of swing. Free jazz as a challenge to the high academic classicism of bebop. Musical dimensions instead of designations. But also: Tony

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> I have argued elsewhere that various historical criticisms of jazz and improvisation—from Adorno to modern composers hostile to the supposedly egoism, subjective whim, and false freedom—are rather shortsighted, and perhaps somewhat hypocritical. See Michael Székely, “Becoming-Still: Perspectives on Musical Ontology after Deleuze and Guattari,” *Social Semiotics* 13 (2003): 121–123. Jeremy Gilbert also pinpoints the mark of this criticism as taking jazz and improvisation to espouse a “naïve ideology of spontaneous immediacy.” See Jeremy Gilbert, “Becoming-Music: The Rhizomatic Moment of Improvisation,” in *Deleuze and Music*, eds. Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 135.

Williams's drumming in the 1960s Davis quintet as both rupture and connection of rhythm and interplay within a given "idiom."

### It's "Passible": Musician-Composers and Musician-Listeners

Perhaps a broader correlate to something like Bailey's distinction between idiomatic and non-idiomatic musics is the discourse surrounding "experimentalism" and/versus "improvisation." With the former concept, we might think of certain strains of the classical avant-garde; with the latter, we often think, not surprisingly, of jazz. Here, a hot topic of interest and debate for theorists and practitioners of improvisation is the relationship between improvisation (let us assume, for the moment, the most collective, "free" form of improvisation imaginable) and composition. But I have asked: Is this not an unfair question from the start? Might it not be said that the improviser, even while improvising, composes as well? Again, whereas we may have previously been relegated to matters of definition, categorization, and genre, such questions now become *ontological*.<sup>40</sup> They become ontological because they really concern questions of the musical space, of what music does, of how music moves, of the affect and relationality of music. I have written previously of how experimentalism, in this context, works to dismantle the artistic "ego" with the goal of letting the "music itself" speak, of letting its "plastic" and transparent qualities transmit unencumbered. As an interesting case along these lines, I once again think of John Cage's music, as Cage is especially known for his interest in "pure" sounds, "indeterminacy," and "chance operations." A musician and improviser myself, as well as a great admirer of Cage, I was nevertheless initially somewhat surprised when I learned of his distaste for improvisation. I always knew that Cage's music was not routinely considered to be part of "improvisation" (certainly not "jazz") as a genre. Nor were the musicians playing Cage's music, methodologically speaking, "improvising." Obviously. Obviously? For Cage himself, and other experimental avant-garde composers, improvisation was the antithesis of a kind of soft objectivism, because jazz posited the musician before the music, intention before chance, and ego before no ego. Yes, improvisation is "active," it might be granted, but it is precisely *too* active: style and individualism take over, leaving no room for the soon-to-be "passive" listener. But is this true of improvisation? Although it is true that style and spontaneity are crucial aspects of

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as if to find a lost kindred spirit in theory, I have recently discovered the term "improvisational ontology," which the cultural theorist Timothy S. Murphy uses to describe his project of "a large-scale investigation of the relations between contemporary music, philosophy and politics." Timothy S. Murphy, "Composition, Improvisation, Constitution: Forms of Life in the Music of Pierre Boulez and Ornette Coleman," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3 (1998): 97–98. Murphy's improvisational ontology is aligned with: (1) my own previous attempts to resuscitate somewhat a "musical ontology" that is not necessarily beholden to musical "works" and/or certain transcendent aesthetic "properties" of those works through the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (see Székely, "Becoming-Still"), among others; and, of course, (2) the present essay's discussion of "improvisationality." For more on improvisational ontology, also see Murphy, "Improvisation as Idiomatic."

improvisation, it is often a kind of *reflexivity* in the music as it is unfolding that dominates improvisation, and both musician and listener activity in improvisation. But then, as a listener I hear ... I experience ... style and spontaneity in Cage's music, too—despite what I take to be the somewhat predetermined (but even this may be unfair) role of the performer. Improvisation thus responds that the kind of detached, “passive” objectivism of certain music of the classical avant-garde leaves the “active” listener—supposedly free to simply experience the “music itself,” devoid of style, personality, spontaneity—cold, with no opening, and in yet another sense, “passive.”

I now assert that improvisationality can mean an envisioning of the relationship between improvisation and composition as undergoing a transformation, where Cage becomes an improviser as well, and the composer composing is also the composer *improvising*. In fact, as with certain more recent philosophical interrogations of the stark distinction between “subject” and “object”—which has broader ramifications for ethics, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, not to mention aesthetics, under which aspects of the present essay obviously fall—the notion of improvisationality discussed here would be wary of this similar distinction between subjectivity, style, spontaneity, and whim on the one hand, and objectivity, design, structuration, and detachment, on the other. Perhaps, then, in addition to the immanence, affectivity, and sound that we mentioned above, Jean-François Lyotard's notion of *passibility* would also prove instructive here:

Passibility as the possibility of experiencing (*pathos*) presupposes a donation. If we are in a state of passibility, it's that something is happening to us, and when this passibility has a fundamental status, the donation itself is something fundamental, originary. What happens to us is not at all something we have first controlled, programmed, grasped by a concept [*Begriff*]. Or else, if what we are passible to has first been plotted conceptually, how can it *seize us*? How can it test us if we already know, or if we can know—of what, with what, for what, it is done?<sup>41</sup>

Not surprisingly, it proves difficult to place this passage along *either* subjective or objective lines, as speaking for *either* spontaneity or plasticity. It is hard to apply this passage to *either* the case of the improviser or the composer. At first, we might hear Cage in Lyotard: “If we are in a state of passibility, it's that something is happening to us, and when this passibility has a fundamental status, the donation itself is something fundamental, originary.” But then, the improviser retorts: “If what we are passible to has first been plotted conceptually, how can it *seize us*? How can it test us if we already know, or if we can know—of what, with what, for what, it is done?” Lyotard continues later:

Passivity is opposed to activity, but not passibility. Even further, this active/passive distinction opposition presupposes passibility and at any rate is not what matters in the reception [and, we wish to add on behalf of music, performance, and composition] of works of art. The demand for an activity or “interactivity” instead

<sup>41</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, “Something Like: ‘Communication . . . Without Communication,’” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 110–111.



proves that there should be more intervention, and that we are thus through with aesthetic feeling. When you painted, you did not ask for “interventions” from the one who looked, you claimed there was a community. The aim nowadays is not that sentimentality you still find in the slightest sketch by a Cézanne or a Degas, it is rather that the one who receives should not receive, it is that s/he does not let him/herself be put out, it is his/her self-constitution as active subject in relation to what is address to him/her: let him/her reconstitute himself immediately and identify himself or herself as someone who intervenes ... We are thus still derivatives from the Cartesian model of “making oneself master and possessor ...” ... Passibility, in contrast, has to do with an immediate community of feeling demanded across the singular aesthetic feeling.<sup>42</sup>

As a musical alternative to this Cartesian model, John Corbett devotes a section of *Extended Play* to the “free” drummer Milford Graves. Significantly, the emphasis of his analysis is not to celebrate Graves’s accomplishments, nor to shower him with praise. It is to show precisely how, although an “individual” musician, Graves becomes a musical assemblage. We are far from the Cartesian self-versus-other here. Corbett describes how Graves’s independent limbs (“isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers”<sup>43</sup>), “multivoiced percussion,” and “centerless rhythmism”—in other words, his “positing of the body as an ensemble in itself”<sup>44</sup>—suggests an alternative conception of the musician. You can extend the example of Graves beyond drumming alone, beyond playing alone, and even beyond “improvisation.” What roles does the musical space at hand allow/afford us?<sup>45</sup> This is a question, Lyotard might say, not of “interaction,” or “intervention” (or for Derrida, of “invention”), *per se*, but of passibility.

Elsewhere, for his part, Corbett applies Barthes’s distinction between the readerly text and the writerly text to music in particular. Here, the readerly with respect to music primarily concerns “finished” elements, such as the written musical text or the score or recording. The writerly text with respect to music is, however, in a word, improvisation. However, where Barthes’s writings on these ideas are usually referenced in the context of addressing issues concerning aesthetic *reception*, Corbett seems to utilize these concepts for an exploration of *performance/composition*. At the very least, he seems to blur the application of Barthes’s writerly/readerly opposition, which may very well be his intention. As Corbett clarifies further in an ambitious essay “Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation,” whereas the readerly in music concerns the *products* of musical creation, the writerly in music concerns the *production of* music—i.e., musical creation itself. Corbett states:

<sup>42</sup> Lyotard, “Something Like,” 116–117.

<sup>43</sup> Corbett, *Extended Play*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–80.

<sup>45</sup> I am thinking of a musical space, most generally, as constituting a sense of *there-ness*, of taking part in something, of being “along for the ride.” The implication is not so much of a beginning and an end (i.e., from this point to that point, or from time *x* to time *y*). Nor am I suggesting something that is ordered, or structured, though it may—perhaps must—entail certain ordering and structuring processes.

To render a writerly text readerly is to record it; recording involves the post-facto selection, editing, organization, sequencing, titling, and packaging (all compositional, not improvisational considerations) of music that has been made by means of improvisation but is now repeatable and fixed. To render a readerly text writerly, on the other hand, is to improvise it; for instance, to consider the use of recorded music in improvisation via samplers and turntables.<sup>46</sup>

Corbett suggests, of course, that there is perhaps somewhere between the readerly and writerly in music, the conflicting possibilities of *re-reading*: “Rereading music—listening again—thus allows for recognition of structural elements, presents new analytic possibilities, and reveals the constructed nature of a piece ... However, it also further erases the writing at its base, which the written text in literature or written analysis constantly avows in rereadings.”<sup>47</sup> Or, stated differently:

While rereading a text lets the reader in on its structure and gives him or her the capacity to navigate through it in ways other than those the author scripted, rereading music serves to naturalize the sound, to make it appear less related to its written structuration, to make its structure more audible but also to make its unfolding seem that much more *inevitable*.<sup>48</sup>

Again, here the “reader” is not even the writerly reader of Barthes, but the actual performer/composer. Rereading as subtracting, adding, and recombining. Reading not relation to a given, but rather in relation to an *unfolding*.

Barthes’s readerly/writerly concept may, then, show its most profound impact via Corbett’s valorization of “the use of recorded music in improvisation,” where the writerly in/of improvisation meets with the rereading in/of recording and sampling. A more obvious version of this is perhaps British improviser Evan Parker’s Electro-Acoustic Ensemble, which blends an acoustic saxophone, bass, and drums (a fairly traditional instrumentation for jazz) with three, sometimes four, musicians who play live electronics and signal processing. Some performances will begin with a solely acoustic trio section, followed by a transformation of what had just been played by the acoustic trio by the electronic musicians through sound processing, followed by a section featuring both groups.<sup>49</sup> But then in this approach, we are given a short, yet significant, taste of the very musical implement that has, in recent years, risen to the status of an instrument, precisely because of its application in completely different and increasingly diverse settings than those for which it was originally intended: the sampler. As suggested on the website dedicated to the band Cibo Matto,

Probably the most misunderstood of instruments, the sampler is revolutionizing music, widening the composer’s palette from notes and instruments to very specific sound samples that couldn’t otherwise be recreated. Just as the editing capabilities of the word processor changed the *process* of writing, not just the speed, the

<sup>46</sup> John Corbett, “Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–219.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the following recording by Evan Parker’s Electro-Acoustic Ensemble: *Toward the Margins*, ECM 453514, 1997, compact disc; and *Drawn Inward*, ECM 547209, 1999, compact disc.

sampler brings new ways of blending, fusing, looping, and shaping musical sounds.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly enough, although *Cibo Matto*'s sound ultimately comes closer to a kind of alternative pop pluralism than improvised jazz, in this context, it is appropriate to say that the group "improvises," or better, that they *have* improvised compositionally—reread, recombined, in the creation of their music, with great assistance from the sampler.<sup>51</sup>

As Paul R. Kohl writes, "sampling provides a technological means to resist dominant ideas of ownership. It is fitting that the tradition of sampling originated in oppressed communities using the music of previously marginalized musicians."<sup>52</sup> This claim is a somewhat different spin on the domain of *appropriation*, which can—especially in the hand of musical purists—have a more negative connotation. Here, appropriation is, in fact, a source of expansive artistic creativity and, quite possibly, resistance.

Finally, as perhaps a combination of Parker's group and *Cibo Matto*, DJ Spooky's music is itself an ambitious, hybridized music, which seems to quite literally use music as both a forum for artistic bricolage and as a tool for negotiating the condition of postmodernity of which we spoke earlier. According to DJ Spooky,

Essentially, for me, music is a metaphor, a tool for reflection. We need to think of music as information, not simply as rhythms, but as codes for aesthetic translation between blurred categories that have slowly become more and more obsolete. For me, the DJ metaphor is about thinking around the concept of collage and its place in the everyday world of information, computational modelling, and conceptual art.<sup>53</sup>

Not surprisingly, this discussion is part of an interview focusing on the key influence of Deleuze and Guattari on Spooky's work, whereby "the basic sense of 'rhizomatic' thought—thinking in meshworks, in nets that extend to other nets—[is] the driving force of my music and art. I think it's a great place to start thinking about a philosophy of 'the remix.' The 'remix' is about certain kinds of polyphony—it's about making multiple rhythms work together, synchronized, cut, pasted, and collaged."<sup>54</sup>

## Performing Listening

By way of an almost naïve-sounding confession, Corbett moves from the sampler to the sampling of life, courtesy of recombination (Spooky's "remixing"):

<sup>50</sup> From the *Cibo Matto* website. <http://www.wbr.com/cibomatto/bio.html> (accessed January 8, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, *Cibo Matto's Viva! La Woman*, Warner Bros 45989, 1996, compact disc, or *Stereo Type A*, Warner Bros 47345, 1999, compact disc.

<sup>52</sup> Paul R. Kohl, "Reading Between the Lines: Music and Noise in Hegemony and Resistance," *Popular Music and Society* 21 (1997): 3–17.

<sup>53</sup> From DJ Spooky's official website, *DJ Spooky: That Subliminal Kid*. [http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze\\_and\\_guattari.html](http://www.djspooky.com/articles/deleuze_and_guattari.html) (accessed January 8, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

At last, I have a CD machine with shuffle mode. It's a miraculous button, "shuffle." In an instant it does away with the logic behind decades of music industry packaging, the kind of logic that works with A-side and B-sides (the soon-to-be-obscure domain of records and tapes), the same logic that sequences a release in a particular way so that cuts are preceded and followed by appropriate others ... Now a disc can renew itself virtually every time it's played, putting together unforeseeable combinations, segues, connections, and leaps of faith. As I see it, this is one of the great possibilities of musical postmodernity. In the process of shuffling, *the activity of making connections and creating meaning is somehow thrust back into the lap of the listener.*<sup>55</sup>

Returning now to the ramifications of Barthes's *writerly*, which we might now also call improvisationality, the "shuffle" option Corbett mentions is both an actual, or literal, example and a representative, or figurative, example of "musical postmodernity" at work in the receptive realm. A simple button allows us to adapt one aspect of the way we listen to music, but it also has broader ramifications for putting musical experience, and the control of its meaning, "back into the lap of the listener," as Corbett says.

Of course, this condition is not without concerns. Paradoxically, it is precisely the loss of "material contact" inherent in the digital age that Corbett clearly laments in the contemporary milieu of the listening experience. This view implicates not only technology (music as "captured"), but it also makes a point about the social and political situatedness of music and musical experience in general—what Attali called the "political economy of music." For example, those scratches, hisses, shouts, and gasps that are more audible on vinyl are traces of the performance of music—both in the sense of the *performing*, of the music by musicians, and the *performative*, we might say, entailing the listener's engagement with the music (e.g., creating meaning). We are swallowed by the silencing impact of technology. This technology is now, in a sense, a technology that "sees" (we often speak of the "eye" of the laser, Corbett reminds us). Hence the premium Corbett puts on Attali's insistence "that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible."<sup>56</sup> We might then ask: on the heels of an economy of mass reproduction (what Attali called "repetition"), do the CD player, and other modes of digitization, simply point toward a new problem regarding the autonomy of art? If so, this predicament would return us to the complicated elitism of an Adorno, who notably asserted that only a modernist classical avant-garde that essentially defies the techniques, commercialization, and expectations of music as capitalist commodity and "regressive listening" could achieve the truly utopian political move. Could digital technology be said to "autonomize" music by internalizing and flattening the irregularities of its very production? A shift away from the sociality of music—the increase or decrease of which, not surprisingly, seems to run parallel to the increase or decrease concerning instances of musical performance—is seen both figuratively and literally: figuratively, in terms of our underlying sense of people getting together with a variety of

<sup>55</sup> Emphasis added. Corbett, *Extended Play*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 3.

instruments and implements (each with its own textures, timbres, and idiosyncrasies), and organizing sound together in a musical space (which itself has varied characteristics) both physically and socially; literally, in terms of the direct, sensual experience of music unfolding before us. Again, this shift need not refer only to the visual and aural experience of live performance.<sup>57</sup>

Corbett's intention with the seemingly simple example of the shuffle button is to deterritorialize its previous role in silencing and digitizing our experience of music. In this example, Corbett opens new possibilities for interaction, but in the sense of passibility that we saw with Lyotard, for both performer and listener. With even greater significance, Kohl echoes this idea when he (perhaps to our surprise) describes compact discs as "revolutionary in that they have allowed for a new way of listening to musical history. No longer are the musical canons of the past as well defined as they once were. By pushing a few buttons on one's compact disc player, one can reprogram an entire album with ease."<sup>58</sup> Extended more broadly, then, this possibility concerning the cultivation of newer directions in the apprehension of music is not given by some magical, dialectical twist of fate, but precisely by the playing out of musical rereadings and recombinations themselves, be they technological or other. We need not remain individually isolated as lost consumers with our CD collection, nor is music suddenly once again fulfilling some sort of sacrificial performance rite.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the CD and various other technologies have ushered in their own kind of noise and improvisationality as a result of their deafening silence, a kind of violence as a result of their isolation, forcing us not only to discover better uses, but to discover them on our own terms—that is, to improvise.

## Tag

Attali argued that the *only* path left for the musician of the late twentieth century to take was to make music solely for the autonomous pleasure of making music, although what this might mean is a rather complicated affair. Corbett, citing Attali, further clarifies the significance of the Graves example:

Against a reading of multivoiced percussion that would seek to work it back into the general *rhetoric of "liberation"* associated with free jazz, it is possible to read

<sup>57</sup> Corbett's concern here does not signify some sort of nostalgic plea for a return to the good old days of vinyl. Besides, good old vinyl is apparently doing quite fine in this day and age. In the hands of collectors, this recording medium is cherished for its rounder, warmer qualities. In the hands of "spinners" (from hip-hop to pop to improvisational jazz), it is utilized for its uniquely percussive textures, rhythmic possibilities, and readymade potential for the immediate disruption of musical time. The turntable returns as a reflection of a new musical economy, in which the technological implements that were used for very specific purposes in repetition are more and more being put in the hands of musicians, who might, in turn, create new uses, new combinations, new contexts, and new codes with them.

<sup>58</sup> Kohl, "Reading Between the Lines," 3–17.

<sup>59</sup> In *Noise*, Attali describes the sacrificial economy as "pre-industrial," existing before music is considered as part of a professional milieu. Instead of being bought, sold, and exchanged, music as sacrifice has no "exchange value." It is simply and unabashedly utilized for the purposes of festival and ritual.

Graves' solo work into a general social rubric, as Attali suggests: "Music effects a reappropriation of time and space. Time no longer flows in a linear fashion; sometimes it crystallizes in stable codes in which everyone's composition is compatible, some in a multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies become more burdensome, and rules dissolve."<sup>60</sup>

It must be noted how this passage suggests an apprehension of music and musical performance beyond merely that of free jazz or free improvisation alone. By likening Graves's percussion to a "general social rubric," Corbett exemplifies the importance of this kind of analysis for criticism and engagement as well. It is not so much a matter of what the music will sound like, or what genre will take hold as the preferred one. For Corbett, surely the music—meaning the organization of the notes, tones, and sounds of jazz and improvisation—is important, but not as important as the dynamic aesthetic that the music engenders and its ramifications for criticism and reception. Thus, improvisationality-as-practice might contribute to any number of different musics, but that is the point: "Music as information," says DJ Spooky, "not simply as rhythms, but as codes for aesthetic translation between blurred categories that have slowly become more and more obsolete."<sup>61</sup> For his part, Corbett, following Deleuze and Guattari, calls for a "schizoanalysis of musical performance."<sup>62</sup> The concept of schizoanalysis utilizes schizophrenia as a model for the way in which our experience can be discontinuous, fragmented, decentered, varied, etc. Eugene W. Holland also makes the connection to improvisational jazz and schizoanalysis, echoing Corbett:

The best concrete illustration of the *process* of schizophrenia I know of is improvisational jazz ... [in which] group organization is less rigidly structured, and interaction within the group is more spontaneous and free-form.

Jazz not only presents to my mind an ideal instance of human relations and interpersonal dynamics but actually suggests a social ideal: the use of accumulated wealth as the basis for the shared production and enjoyment of life in the present rather than the reproduction and reinforcement of power-structures from the past.<sup>63</sup>

*Who* is it that organizes sound in such a way? That manipulates rhythms in such a way? That hears silence in such a way? Where we once apprehended the "composer" as writer, performer, arranger, this has become too simple and restrictive an interpretation. All are composers—organizers, rhythmatisers, hearers—and all are improvisers. Free jazz as aesthetic and ethic. Music(ian) as assemblage.

## Abstract

In this essay, I explore the possibilities of improvisation—or what might better be called "improvisationality"—as something of an aesthetic model and, possibly, an

<sup>60</sup> Emphasis added. Corbett, *Extended Play*, 79.

<sup>61</sup> *DJ Spooky: That Subliminal Kid*.

<sup>62</sup> Corbett, *Extended Play*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), xi.

ethical practice, beyond the confines of genre. Paradoxically, the focal point for my discussion is the genre of “free improvisation,” or “free jazz,” but my interest here emphasizes more the musical practices (broadly construed) that these formative examples of improvisation engender. Echoing what Jacques Attali, in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, called “composition,” a look into improvisationality concurrently entails a pragmatics of the critical and theoretical discursive possibilities suggested by improvisational music toward the reconfiguration of our musical experience as both musician-composers and listeners. Here, the deconstructing impetus of postmodern critique meets the utopian skepticism of critical theory, and postmodern musical heterogeneity attains its immanent force more through an erotics of sound and affect than through genre-focused pastiche. Improvisation and composition collide, and the fruits of supposedly distinct “idiomatic” and “non-idiomatic” musics become blurred and intertwined, as one chases the other’s tail. Freedom might paradoxically reach its possibility precisely through the work of the “impossible,” as suggested in Derrida’s work, and “passability,” a term Lyotard employs in his discussions of aesthetic experience and reception in order to blur the hard distinction between “active” and “passive” modes of aesthetic engagement. Such concepts allow for an apprehension of music that would not be given by some magical, dialectical twist of fate, but precisely by the playing out of musical rereadings and recombinations themselves, be they technological or other. Here, we not only discover better uses of music, but we discover them on our own terms. We improvise.