

Improvocracy?¹

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sometimes music becomes more than music
Sun Ra, "The Outer Darkness"

Oh, I don't think [improvisation] has importance. I think you could work out some philosophical or political aspect but I don't think it has much significance except for the people who dig it. It has such a limited power of communication.
Derek Bailey (in Peterson 8)

I. Containing Multitudes: Improvisation and Meaning

If improvisation is the art of improbable alternatives—improbable, but also inevitable because they happen in real time—what might that art teach us about other forms of social organization? Say one were to substitute forms of democratic practice with improvisatory musical practice: what might result?

Improvocracy? An uncomfortable neologism, perhaps. Perhaps also an inducement to examine claims about the implications of improvisatory musical practices for other social forms not normally associated with improvisation.

Does improvisation teach lessons that transfer to political and social forms, especially those in the process of ossification, self-parody, or atrophy? What ensures constant renewal of social and political practices based on creative alternatives that are collectively agreed upon via a systemic exploration of what works and what doesn't? Does the emancipatory potential embedded in the practice of musical improvisation offer credible alternatives to sites where the full creative promise of being human is impeded, less than effective, or wholly illusory? If improvisation is by definition undefinable, too overwhelmingly diverse in its multiple forms and practices to be reduced to any one thing, what might it teach about other forms of social practice?

Improvising multi-instrumentalist and composer Fred Frith has pointed to the arguability of improvisation as "a single and identifiable genre with a universally understood ideology," and clarified that "all of the agenda-driven, ideological discourse surrounding improvisation doesn't hold much appeal for me. Not to say that it isn't important or necessary, more that it appears to unconsciously set up the very ossification that it's intended to avoid" (qtd. in Chan).

Agreed.

But what do we then do with the multiple examples of improvisatory musicking allied with liberatory political discourses? (Think, for example, of Wadada Leo Smith's sustained and substantial body of work as both an improviser and a social activist, discussed at greater length elsewhere in this issue.) What do we do with underlying principles of improvisation that tie it firmly to freedom of speech, to thinking and embodying creatively in hitherto unexplored ways, to a widely felt belief—one that is assumed but one that needs challenging too—that ties improvisatory musicking to being free in fundamentally creative ways deeply linked to being fully human?

Does asking how improvisation as a social practice relates to politics reduce its capacity to resonate in multiple contexts that extend far beyond politics? If we consider Frith's parenthetical admission that having this discussion is still somehow "necessary" and "important," how do we begin the conversation? How can we be mindful of the pitfalls of reducing improvisation to mere political instrumentality, or of limiting the possibilities for politics to be improvisatory in unexpected new ways? Either possibility is undesirable.

I ask these questions in the mode of provocations to further reflection on a vexatious topic, one that has come in many ways to define the emergent field of improvisation studies. The parameters are familiar. Music need never be anything more than self-referential—an expressive end in and of itself. At the same time, music comes to mean something more than itself in different contexts depending on audience reception, performative intention, paratexts, and a host of other interventions that give social meaning to music that exceeds the sound. For purists, the sound is all that matters. For those who find meaning beyond the aural, no sound is neutral. Sound is both unto itself and bound to context. Out of the hybrid of representation for itself and representation that gathers meaning as it is iterated through different contexts, the social nature of music is confirmed—and oftentimes left ambivalent in terms of what

and how it means. This scenario produces a fraught relationship for grasping how music is at once utterly its own even as its meanings—historical, religious, spiritual, political—gather force in relation to sound. Music remains irreducible, but awkwardly so, bound to the contexts out of which it arises, the audiences it seeks to address, the intentions (or not) of the performers, composers, producers and practitioners who ineluctably deepen its place in social practices without which it would not exist. Are the blues played by a white racist still the blues? The question disturbs and disrupts comfortable assumptions about how music as beyond linguistic meaning actually means in relation to social and political contexts that inevitably gather around specific musical utterances. When notes and affective gestures are exactly present but the social context in which the music is made violates, distorts, and contradicts the original socio-musical conditions of the genre, what gets produced? Now ask a similar question, in the mode of a perhaps uncomfortable thought experiment, of free jazz played by fascists? Of bluegrass music played by non-Appalachians, non-“hillbillies”? Of hip-hop played by black misogynists? Of classical Western music played by non-Westerners? Of North Indian classical music played by South Indians? On the one hand, all these musics have specific sources and socio-political contexts—to be sure. But that cannot limit its potential meanings however odious, different, or contradictory are the contexts. Does not music’s affect, its resilient, resolute indeterminacies predicated on relational contingencies that always remain to be made, allow players to enter a zone where these very qualities offer a way out of rigidified, perverse, or highly differentiated cultural formations, however fleeting this way out may be, however problematic, however troubling, however difficult to achieve [. . .] a way out of no way?

Is this generative unknowability not where music’s greatest most vexing potential meanings lie? Might some of what Albert Ayler and Mary Maria Parks meant in calling their 1969 album, “Music is the Healing Force of the Universe,” address music’s affective power, its potential to transform meaning in ways that truly matter? Or what South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim has noted is key to music’s power as a “healing force,” one derived in traditional societies from the fact that “music and healing are almost the same principle” (Ibrahim n.p.)? Or what any other number of improvisers and musicians have identified as the power of music to affect and transform themselves and others? In Sun Ra’s 1972 poem “The Sound Image,” there is a richly nuanced description of musical indeterminacy that is also wedded to the psycho-spiritual and political sense of music, encapsulated in his phrase “If you’re not sound, / Then you’re not pure”:

There is a tide and time of sound
 This the music is like a journey
 Which is endless
 Unscheduled directions are suddenly necessary
 Now and then to synchronize the code momentum dimension
 To environmental light or darkness equation-balance image
 Or improvisational alter counterpoint blueprint sound.
 The music is not only just music.
 It touches and projects other dimensions
 Time-zone eternities and cosmo-infinity spiral-parallel
 The parallels are feels/fields of parables, which are instruments
 For the instruments are not only just instruments
 The people are the instrument. (*Collected Works* 172-73)

The metaphysics of this vision are wholly consistent with Ra’s improvisatory practices and with the communitarian forms he created in which to fulfill this vision, which was itself a profound critique of and commentary on racism in the U.S. Music is “not only just music” but a multi-dimensional expression of “the people” and the “cosmo-infinity spiral-parallel” that allegorize musical indeterminacy. These concepts connect music in the most direct way to underlying and interlinked forms of being cosmically human as a co-generative process of making sound, of endless journeying, which is fundamentally indeterminate (“unscheduled”) and unpredictable even as it is necessary and ineluctable (as an “improvisational alter counterpoint blueprint sound”). Moreover, Ra’s vision plays out on a continuum with other voices, like that of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose remarkable “Sorrow Songs” chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*, talks of the meaning of Black slave song as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (538). Song/sound for Du Bois has political context and meaning; it has history; and it has a metaphysics—that of the spirit searcher, of the disenfranchised wanderer looking for truth and justice—all allegories for the Black experience in the Americas. Du Bois says, “The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words” (538), pointing to the “journey” embedded in the music. And ultimately, Du Bois finds that in the “sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things ... [in the] sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond” (544), a vision that Ra situates in the purity of sound and its infinite capacity to generate an improvisational alter counterpoint. In the continuum I am imagining from Du Bois to Ra there are powerful notions of music in relation to the multiple contexts that music addresses as a form of human expression that contains multitudes.

In such a perspective, the cultural contexts associated with specific forms of music can be highly politicized, but not reductively so for music's signifying power always ultimately resides in its irreducibility to any one thing that cages it into something static and wholly knowable. This is especially evident in some of the cases I've described above like slave song or the blues, where pernicious racism, slavery, and oppression gave rise to forms of musicking specifically identified with freedom-seeking and resistance to oppression, musicking whose politics was very precisely a refusal of reducible freedom-limiting structures of interpretation. The creators of and audiences for the blues understood the music to have a politics aligned with the consciousness of oppression that played a crucial role not only in the music but in the rights movements associated with the struggle to overcome that oppression. This was the consciousness, as Abdullah Ibrahim eloquently put it in a recent public interview at the 2012 Guelph Jazz Festival, that *slaves* did not come from Africa, *people* came from Africa who were turned into slaves by a vicious economic and political system that, with a few notable exceptions, sanctioned the evil.

Not every genre of music is as highly politicized or derives from as brutal a history. Yet music remains irreducible enough in how it represents that to *not* acknowledge its expansive affective vocabulary however complicated and equivocal are the resulting scenarios, would be to constrain the very generative potential to make meaning anew that arises out of all musical gestures on the verge of their iteration. Musical indeterminacy trumps language about music at just about every go. Musical indeterminacy of this sort expresses the unique nature of the public commons—its capacity to set aside ownership in lieu of the co-creation of a public space that always remains to be made, one that is not necessarily uncomplicated, in tense relation to itself and others, or troubled by contention. And that indeterminacy also has the potential to trump codes of meaning associated with the music itself as a function of social and historical provenance. So the situation is profoundly nuanced when trying to understand musical meaning through filters other than just the music itself, and especially so when one understands that so called musical appropriations of the sort I mention above carry meaning too and must be read for what they are, what they might be, what they might become.

Nominal forms, conventional progressions, even musical clichés may be iterated in social, political, and cultural contexts that dramatically shapeshift music's meanings. Singularity gives way to plurality. Form is but *one* aspect of making meaning from music. Social context another. Intention another. Audience reception another. Historical formations that are deeply sedimented, as may be observed in Black diasporic musicking, are yet another contributor to meaning. And while no sound is necessarily neutral, no sound is necessarily reducible to any one social meaning either. And this is especially so in assigning value to musical form, so often a function of hierarchical structures deeply embedded in other institutional forms predicated on the superior/inferior binary. (Improvisatory music's marginality in terms of allocation of resources and sites of performance is more a function of institutional relationships of power and taste than it is an indicator of the creative potential or meaning to be found in its iteration.) Because musical representation combines multiple elements then filters them through potent and unpredictable expressions of affect, what it comes to mean is exceedingly subtle, potentially resonant, and *vulnerable* (in the etymological sense of both being wounded and capable of wounding)—a reminder of how much is at stake in non-discursive representations that nonetheless carry with them histories, social contexts, political resonances, and meanings yet to be made—the uncertain potentials that any improviser is well aware of when an improvisation begins and as it proceeds. And it is important to remind ourselves that like other cultural forms, music and its meanings are tied to structures of power that mediate, and often dictate, what “we” are to think of as acceptable, conventional, or orthodox forms of music that are listenable and commercially viable. But this mediation can only go so far in confining music's radical potential for alterity, for producing affect in terms that are resolutely contrarian or in opposition to institutionally sanctioned forms. Institutional or commercial arbiters of taste are hardly reliable when it comes to experimental forms predicated on complex creative strategies that arise in, say, the improvisatory moment. What is at least partially at stake in that moment is how vulnerable (or intolerant) normative forms are to difference and to protean structures of meaning that can be deeply unsettling.

When affect filters through so many other variables, the unspeakable mixes with the speakable in sophisticated ways that deflect how meaning is generated and interpreted. This remarkable pliability, the elasticity of affect as it intersects with multiple contexts in variable ways, its ability to contain multitudes, are precisely what make music irreducible and equivocal—even as it denotes, among other things, the specific social contexts, relations, and practices out of which it arises. Multiple forms of semiotic coding, of affective information, of intersecting matrices of potential meaning, of sedimented histories, are evident in music. It is this elastic relational quality of musical meaning that Christopher Small attends to in his definition of musicking as

establishing in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in the those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as a metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and

person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. These are important matters, perhaps the most important in human life [...] (13)

For Small, then, the relational component of musicking is essential: musicking is at once processual and dependent on social, embodied interaction, neither of which produces, necessarily, predictable outcomes. As David Byrne reminds, “before recording technology existed, you could not separate music from its social context. It was pretty much all tied to specific social functions. It was communal, and often utilitarian. You couldn’t take it home, copy it, sell it as a commodity (except as sheet music, but that’s not music), or even hear it again. Music was a singular experience, something connected to a specific time and place” (210). Small’s notion of musicking reinstates this singularity of a dynamic interaction in a specific time and place that is deeply participatory, emblematic of a form of public commons expression, and also contingently relational, a co-creative, co-generative act in a specific context in which the context and the musical iteration are inseparable.

In such contexts, music expresses our reciprocal relation to each other, to others, to our environment, to the unknowable even as it expresses what James H. Cone calls, in his analysis of the blues and spirituals that emerged from early slave song, “a complex world of *thought*” (19) located in specific historical circumstances that gave rise to specific forms of musicking. Cone argues that “Black music is [...] social and political. It is social because it is *black* and thus articulates the separateness of the black community. It is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of western culture. Black music is political because in its rejection of white cultural values, it affirms the political ‘otherness’ of black people. Through song, a new political consciousness is continuously created, one antithetical to the laws of white society” (6). The oppositional, resistant politics of black musicking noted by Cone find their voice in experimentalists that range from Sun Ra and Albert Ayler through to Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and more recently, William Parker, Matthew Shipp, and any number of artists using improvisation in a highly politicized manner. Here, a specific strain of improvisatory discourse is evident and is determinedly associated with resisting racism and articulating black community through unique musical formations associated with black identity politics.

This narrative, one of many, does not foreclose on other oppositional political gestures found in other forms of improvisatory discourse. Think, for instance, of Derek Bailey’s austere sonic provocations and their gritty assertion of musical contrarianism; or of the Instant Composer’s Pool Orchestra’s (ICP) blend of free-wheeling, witty virtuosity and ironically absurdist anarchy; or of John Stevens’s Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) and his 1983-founded CM (Community Music) organization with its radical alternatives to help youth who do not necessarily have formal training make new music (a form of “music from below” attack on class-based notions of musical value and who has the right to create music and play it); or of John Zorn’s Radical Jewish Culture project, which he sees, citing Gershom Sholem, as a “living relationship” that explores new forms in relation to tradition: “Just as jazz music has progressed from dixieland to free jazz and beyond in a few short decades, and classical music went from tonality to chromaticism, noise and back again, it has occurred to me that the same kind of growth should be possible—and is perhaps essential—for Jewish music” (Zorn).

As a major improvisatory voice who has also played a key role through Tzadik in creating performance and recording outlets for improvised musicking, Zorn is yet another strand in the rich narrative of musical provocateurs that use improvisatory techniques as a distinctive element in their artistic practice. In the case of Stevens, one of the aims of CM is to “challenge discrimination through positive collaborative music making experiences” (“About CM” n.p.). And as part of its egalitarian philosophy Stevens was explicit that “Any sound can be a material used in music making” and that participatory co-creation of the sort CM encourages is predicated on “showing that everyone can have a creative role in the music that the group is making” (Stevens 2).

With regard to the ICP, as Floris Schuiling has shown in some detail, the late 60s and early 70s political protests in France and in the Netherlands very much played a role in the anti-authoritarian stance associated with the ICP and its members:

The music of the ICP and their approach to performance has to be understood in relation to the political atmosphere in the worlds of both jazz and ‘art’ music in the Netherlands at the time, which in turn reflect broader European countercultural movements. Mengelberg and Breuker had been involved with the ‘Notenkrakersactie’ (Nutcracker demonstration—‘noot’ in Dutch means nut as well as note) on 17 November 1969. Together with Mengelberg’s fellow students Louis Andriessen, Reinbert de Leeuw, Jan van Vlijmen, Peter Schat and others, they interrupted a flute concert by Quantz, conducted by Bernard Haitink, with ratchets and other toy instruments in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. The composers had been unsatisfied with the policies regarding the programming of contemporary music as well as with Haitink as a conductor of contemporary music. They had suggested other conductors, such as Bruno Maderna or Pierre Boulez, to be employed alongside Haitink, but this suggestion had been ignored. In 1966 a public and partly televised debate was organised by the five composers, again with no result.

On 30 May 1968, when the uproars in Paris reached a high point, they organised a 'politiek-demonstratief experimenteel concert', with pieces by Andriessen, Schat, and Mengelberg. Especially Andriessen and Schat were much attracted by communism – Mengelberg was less explicit about his political orientation, but supported their actions [...] At the 'politiek-demonstratief' concert, the relation of their political ideas to musical practice was made explicit. The programme book included citations of people like Lenin, Mao, Trotsky and Adorno—and a statement from Mengelberg distancing himself from communist thinking. Mengelberg's contribution to the concert was *Hello Windyboys*, a 'game piece' prescribing the rules of a musical game for the musicians rather than specific notes, and also including audience participation. In the words of contemporary and sympathising writer Harry Mulisch, also inventor of the name *Notenkraker*: 'Just like mathematics, music can only have "meaning" in its application: through conjunction with words and pictures, or by making an opera for example. But it has political significance only through its performance practice.' Leaflets that were handed out at the *Notenkrakersactie* also addressed the politics of performance practice: in a Marxist vein, the musicians in the Concertgebouw (or any other) orchestra were described as alienated from their product by the orchestral division of labour. (37-38)

At the root of the ICP's inception, then, there is a specific underlying philosophy of musical practice as political practice, one that emphasizes embodied performance as productive of political significance. Performance practices enact a politics. Nor should we forget Derek Bailey's *Company Weeks* series, which ran from 1977 until 1994, with the aim of colliding improvisers in unusual constellations for the first time. Again, a politics of performance was evident in Bailey's series with a focus on experimentation, collective interplay brought about by hitherto untried musical combinations, and the artistic challenges that ensue in such a free improvisatory context. As surely as *Company Weeks* explored experimental sounds arising from novel combinations of players, it also explored the politics of collective uncertainty made manifest in improvisatory discourses arising from this sort of musical play.

These are but a few examples from a plethora of narratives in which creative improvised music and social contexts are fused ineluctably. The point here is that in all these cases, from post-Diasporic Americas slave culture through to post-war improvising European groups—formed at roughly the same time as the student protests in Europe against state authoritarianism, the war in Vietnam, and the struggle for rights for the disenfranchised, for women, for the GLBT community, for immigrants, and for the poor—the political and cultural contexts, in all their stunning and complex detail, are inseparable from the music that was created. I am well aware of how this sort of argument needs significant deepening, especially in light of sociologist Janet Wolff's notions of facile or primitive sociology in which the deep causal and relational contexts of an art form are overridden by overly simplistic notions of historical context putatively refracted through the form. To be sure, the specificities of the narratives relating creative improvised musicking in all its forms and histories to rights struggles, to the political contexts out of which they arose, remains to be told on many levels of analysis that requires precise and informed scholarship. And I remind readers of the considerable work that remains ahead in this area of inquiry, especially as dominant narratives and sites for thinking this relationship give way to others in which the relations between improvisatory musical discourses and the political and social contexts out of which they arise are studied more fully.

American improviser and multi-instrumentalist Ken Vandermark argues, "As with any other art form, Jazz deals with the aesthetic and socio-political concerns of its time, and these issues change as history moves forward chronologically. To merely look backwards in an attempt to recreate models based on former aesthetic conceptions and considerations is to work against the idea of Jazz as a living art form." So jazz and its underlying improvisatory content address the socio-political, the historical, the aesthetic, the here and now. This is what makes it a living form. How can it not—in its methodologies, its stylistic debates, its explorations of form, its substantive content, its embodied spectacle—reflect on its own moment while also reflecting on the histories embedded in that moment? Moreover, *jazz*, though often used as a synonym for *improvisation*, is hardly the only musical form in which improvisation is a powerful agent: the two terms have a wide range of meaning within different associated practices. In the case of more exploratory, non-traditional forms (those associated with bebop or free jazz, for instance), musical insurgence has long had a place alongside political insurgence.

British historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his discussion of the emergence of bebop, has attended to how "The musical revolutionism of the early 1940s is inconceivable without the political upheavals of the 1930s, which gave American blacks increased confidence, while at the same time bringing them closer to the apparently insurmountable barriers which stood between them and equality. The bebop revolution was political as much as musical" (55). Hobsbawm describes the technical difficulties in playing bebop as a form of musical coding indexed to black identity, with the extreme virtuosity required by bebop an assurance that the music could not be appropriated by lesser (read white) players. At the same time bebop, as Derek Bailey has written, has become institutionalized, a "pedagogue's delight" and an "easily taught" form of improvisation:

And taught it is; in colleges, music schools, night classes, prisons; through a constant flow of tutors, methods and 'how to' books, resulting in perhaps the first standardized, non-personal approach to teaching improvisation. The mechanics of the style are everywhere; of the restlessness, the adventurousness, the thirst for change which was a central characteristic of the jazz of that period there seems to be no sign at all [. . .] In any event, jazz, whatever the reasons, seems to have changed from an aggressive, independent, vital, *searching* music to being a comfortable reminder of the good old days. (49-50)

Again, the dilemma: between Hobsbawm's and Bailey's views, bebop comes to mean no one thing. Its revolutionary politics transmute into an empty teachable form. Somewhere between the ossification of bebop's revolutionary impulses in conventional pedagogies and its original unsettled spirit associated with Black revolutionary consciousness lies the struggle for a politics of interpretation that matters in the immediate contexts of how improvisatory discourses get formulated and reformulated but also in the contexts of how one pays attention to deep histories embedded in all musicking. Implicit in Bailey's comments is the notion that the sound is never just the sound, notes are not just notes: you can play bebop in a technically correct way while avoiding its intrinsic qualities of "restlessness," "adventurousness," and its "thirst for change." Again, music has interpretive, meaningful qualities that go beyond the notes themselves—that constitute its social field, its affective creative power, its capacity to mean beyond just sound.

That bebop relied on nascent improvisatory techniques specific to its practitioners shows how improvisation, in this and many other cases, is clearly linked to an aestheticized politics. How else can one address, for instance, South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim's 1982 show "Free Mandela" in association with the Kalahari Liberation Orchestra, part and parcel of a larger effort to collect funds for the anti-apartheid African National Congress (ANC); or Charlie Haden's 1969 "Liberation Music Orchestra" with its explicit opposition to the war in Vietnam and its support of the Cuban revolution; or Duke Ellington's 1943 "Black, Brown and Beige" with its civil rights allusions and its marking of what Ellington himself referred to as a "tone parallel to the history of the American Negro" (Gaines 587).² As Iain Anderson has shown, "By the early 1960s, when issues of race increasingly divided musicians, critics, and fans, State Department tours and Voice of America programming appeared to many emerging players as dual symbols of their country's hypocrisy. Subsequent controversies over free improvisation provided a platform for challenging aesthetic and ideological investments in 'America's art form'" (48).

Both the political and the improvisatory are instrumental and deploy instrumentality. There is nothing inherently or necessarily good or bad about either as a form of social practice. Politics can produce positive forms of human expression just as easily as negative forms. Improvisation can deploy human creativity in instrumentally creative and novel ways just as easily as it can fall into cliché and self-parody. And in the case of both the political and improvisatory, there is considerable room for ambiguity of intent and purpose, misdirection, misprision, and outright deception. The use of jazz diplomacy to promote American democratic ideals is a case in point. Lisa Davenport, in her study of the uses of jazz during the Cold War, has shown that

jazz diplomacy illuminated the unequivocal limitations of a democracy in the conduct of foreign affairs. At a time when the struggle for freedom at home and abroad continued to shape international culture and politics, the development of jazz and world events had a profound influence on the evolution of American democracy. As the Cold War challenged America's evolving democratic system, it also obscured the plurality of American culture that made the country unique. Ultimately, because conservative jazz was used to thwart Soviet propaganda worldwide, many of the innovators of jazz who became well known at home and abroad were excluded from cultural tours. Thus jazz diplomacy, especially in the midst of the war in Vietnam, did not reflect the ideals of a pluralistic republican democracy. (149)

Hence, even as America was promoting its democratic values through jazz propagandists, it was restricting the international visibility of highly critical and radical jazz experimentalists who had in their sights the racism, inequality, and segregation that were still very much in evidence in the disposition of American politics. Moreover, as Penny von Eschen writes, the strategy could not contain what was already embedded in the music and its players, people like Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, and Randy Weston, among others:

The jazz ambassadors represented hope and possibility, not a smug claim to a perfected democracy. They articulated their connection to the world as artists and humans, not a sense of uniqueness or superiority. While a jazz combo may not have been a model for a government, it did symbolize the qualities of a vibrant democracy. The jazz artists expressed individual excellence within a profound dependence on and accountability to a collective. Their improvisatory techniques and openness to new musics celebrated the unexpected, and hence the possibilities of democracy and global citizenship rather than the scripted power of empire. (259)

Von Eschen's comments distinguish between the actual effects produced by the musicians as they traveled the globe and the intended uses to which they were put by State Department officials, a tension that is eloquently recounted by Robin Kelley's account of Randy Weston's sojourns in Africa. Kelley notes how "For Weston, the Nigerian trip was never about the performance or the panels or the official festival proceedings. It was an opportunity to study the music, discover his ancestral homeland, and connect with the people. And it changed his life" (70). Weston himself states, "Muslims talk about making the pilgrimage to Mecca, but for me the entire continent of Africa is Mecca" (103). Weston exemplified how the politics of cross-cultural exchange and understanding went hand-in-hand with the improvisatory aesthetics he gave voice to on these diplomatic tours.

In these examples, the tension is over the intended uses that improvisatory musicking is put to in a "democratic" context. If both improvisation and democracy are uncritically deployed to serve a propaganda model of musicking at the service of political meanings that exploit the positive affects of music, then we are no further along. The danger arises when what are essentially fluid, protean forms of human agency begin to ossify into more reductive forms, whether aesthetically or politically. A democratic politics incapable of meaningful self-criticism and real, material change is as deplorable as improvisatory forms that stagnate into cliché³ and self-parody.

Might improvocracy formulate this relationship in such a way that the underlying aesthetic principles of improvisation—its ongoing search for new event horizons of the possible, its capacity to morph into unexpected new forms, its expression of the simultaneity of independent and deeply contingent relations, its radical anti-essentialism—produce substantive effects / affects? Here, I'm suggesting that the accumulated baggage of thinking in terms of solely one form or the other is too cumbersome, too inflected with contradictory agendas and *idées fixes*. What might come of a process that accepts that improvisatory action has political valences that uplift politics beyond the mere allocation of resources based on self-interest, while at the same time accepting that the political can be aestheticized in ways consistent with our most sophisticated forms of creative practice? What might it mean to hold these two thoughts in ongoing, critical tension with each other as a condition for both becoming something more than they already are?

Whether in the contexts of post-9/11 critiques of the war on global terrorism, the Civil Rights Movement's struggles for emancipation, equality, and a less corrupt democratic process, or pre-Civil War campaigns to abolish slavery—improvisatory music has had its say, has been part of the warp and woof of specific histories where ideologies have been contested and refashioned. In specific relation to improvisation, George Lewis has argued that

In both Europe and the United States in the 1960s, musical improvisation was widely viewed as symbolic of a dynamic new approach to social order that would employ spontaneity both to unlock the potential of individuals, and to combat oppression by hegemonic political and cultural systems. In the wake of the events of 1968, the rise of "free jazz" in the United States, and later in Europe, was widely connected with challenges to racism and the social and economic order generally. (3)

In broad strokes, then, there are specific histories associated with improvisatory musicking that align it with a critical, resistant politics in opposition to hegemonic practices of racism and neoliberalism. Jacques Denis notes how in the 1950s jazz targeted racism and neocolonialism and "la réalité d'une oppression née de la ségrégation" [the reality of an oppression born of segregation] before making itself "l'écho de revendications sociales de minorités maltraitées, puis plus largement une prise de conscience du droit à l'altérité" [the echo of social claims of mistreated minorities, then more broadly an awakening with regard to the right to alterity] (34; translation mine). In this generalized movement, then, jazz may be understood as a metonymy for improvisatory discourses associated with African American musicking, a cultural form tied to an evolving political consciousness and sense of identity. In light of this scenario, it has become the responsibility of improvisation studies to identify specific aspects of improvisatory practices that can be understood in relation to the politics of the music.

George Lewis articulates some premises by which improvisation may be understood, based on a 2002 University of California research institute residency he co-led studying "Improvisation In The Contemporary Performing Arts." These premises include the ideas that

- improvisation mediates cross-cultural, transnational and cyberspatial (inter)artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, history and the body
- improvisation functions as a key element in emerging postcolonial forms of aesthetics and cultural production
- improvisative production of meaning and knowledge provides models for new forms of social mobilization that foreground agency, personality and difference.
- improvisative work symbolizes history, memory, agency, difference, personal narrative and self-determination.

- improvisation fosters socialization, enculturation, cultural formation and community development. (1-2)⁴

I note that there is no assignation of value (good or bad) or specific content (What kind of agency? What kind of socialization? What kind of emergent social forms?) to these premises. The assumption that improvisation is always necessarily aligned with progressive, non-violent, anti-hegemonic political forms is fraught if only because it is the specific contingencies and choices made that determine the political content of an improvisatory utterance. And by this I mean choices made not only by the performers, but by the audience and through the multiple contexts in which improvisatory acts occur. There are listening choices, and other forms of choice too, that live on both sides of the stage. The battle is over what specific uses are made of improvisation as it extends its techniques and substantive declamations to other spheres of practice within a context that does not privilege only one (performance) aspect of improvisatory musicking.⁵

Musicologist and jazz pianist David Ake has declared himself

sympathetic to the progressive politics espoused by a number of jazz writers [...] Still, the explicit connection commentators sometimes make between the political left and 'freer' forms of jazz oversimplifies the situation [...] not all artists whose work ventures outside the mainstream are as welcoming of people whose lifestyles some may consider to be outside the mainstream. Conversely, just because someone plays 'inside' does not mean that that person lacks a strong political conscience [...] a libratory [sic] jazz effect does not necessarily denote a libratory [sic] social ethic in the musician(s) who created those sounds. (7-8)

So the proposal that improvisation is somehow inherently democratic very much depends on what you specifically mean by both improvisation and democracy. If by democracy one means a capitalist free-for-all where individual greed triumphs over more broadly based principles of community, as was experienced in the cataclysmic 2008 economic meltdown brought on, some might argue, by wildly improvisatory banking techniques, such a definition might not suit Lewis's or Ake's visions of what progressive or democratic should encompass. In this example, one might say that "improvisative production of meaning and knowledge provides models for new forms of social mobilization that foreground agency, personality and difference," but that in this case it was the agency, personality, and difference of the greedy and minimally regulated banking system that was producing meaning in ways that Lewis and Ake would probably find perverse and at odds with the creative principles of improvised music as they understand it. Again, it is the specific substance and import, the specific use and meaning of improvisation that is at stake in any discussion that links improvisation to politics or to other spheres of human activity. Specific contexts *do* matter. English historian Eric Hobsbawm reminds us (in his book *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*) that democracy is too often taken as a default political system, suggesting that the "proposition that liberal-democratic government is always and *ipso facto* superior or at least preferable to non-democratic government" (98) is highly contestable and problematic. To that effect, Hobsbawm quotes Winston Churchill's pithy line that "Democracy is the worst of all governments, except for all the others" (99). So jazz discourses that align improvisation simplistically and uncritically with democratic practices that are themselves highly contested political models in need of revision and revitalization are as suspect as are romanticized versions of improvisation as a panacea to all forms of failed politics. There is a tense relationship between *interpreting* music as an expression of a politics and *doing* politics as a musical expression.

Similar arguments could be made about corporate business models that appropriate improvisatory techniques to improve productivity, profitability, creative problem solving, and so forth. Pianist and psychologist Keith Sawyer has said, "The collaborative organization's expertise is in the form of equivocal 'riffs' that can easily be recombined—like the stock phrases that jazz musicians use over and over in different solos. Organizations that successfully manage improvisation have group riffs that are known throughout the organization, the same way that a jazz quartet develops emergent patterns over years of playing together" (173-74). Here, the appropriation of a certain conception of improvisation is very much at stake. Who, for instance, determines what constitutes a successful improvisation? Sometimes the most successful improvisatory act is one that culminates in a so-called failure, but a failure that leads to new possibilities. How does Sawyer's use of "success" echo very different models of social and business practice that improvisation might find risibly restrictive and inconsistent with its multiple practices—the notion that improvisation is defined by recombinant stock patterns, which in some aesthetics may be true, but in others a breach of expectation; the notion of "manag[ing] improvisation," which some might find entirely odious and inappropriate; the notion that improvisation arises as a result of "years of playing together," wholly at odds with other improvisatory aesthetics predicated on chance collisions, indeterminacy, and situations that arise in the moment; the notion that jazz and improvisation are necessarily cognates, fixed in meaning, and assumed categories of experience, when they are, in fact, highly contested sites of meaning?

Improvisation in Sawyer's sense is highly restricted and conventional, and perhaps suited to the business model he advocates. But it is far from the practices and philosophies of significant voices in the improvisatory world, for whom Sawyer's ideas might appear highly orthodox and restrictive of their own musical experiences, histories, and creative instincts (think of players like William Parker, Hamid Drake, Kidd Jordan, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, George Lewis, and so forth to cite one genealogy of improvised musicking—or think, Evan Parker, Eddie Prevost, Derek Bailey, Misha Mengelberg, and Peter Brötzmann to cite another set of genealogies).

Sawyer's comments sit comfortably though with iterations from Wynton Marsalis, who states, "We have an artistic imperative to understand and reengage creativity and innovation, not merely as tools for economic growth but as tools for democracy and accomplished citizenship" (166). Marsalis's somewhat circular idea—artists need to be creative (?)—is twinned with economic growth and political agency. But who defines what he might mean by "accomplished citizenry" or "democracy"? Even "creativity and innovation" is entirely up for grabs. Many of the improvisers I list above may well have a divergent view of accomplishment when it comes to creative improvised musicking—and likewise may have substantially different visions of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy. Interestingly absent from this perspective is the cultural commons, a space where freedom, sharing, and creativity co-exist with no other purpose than to nurture these basic forms of being human. Always reducing creative expression to economic output or to political utility in creating a consonant political subject is hardly what the improvisatory roots of jazz are about, especially in the African American context where jazz emerged in resistance to, and in spite of, the racist structures that it has had to fight for much of its existence. Marsalis argues, "Of all the arts created in America, jazz says the most about us. As democracy created an explosion of personal creativity, it stands to reason that the definitive art of America would have an unprecedented roll call of creative artists. To understand them and their achievements is to be armed with examples of creativity, courage, and endurance that would serve us all well" (162). It is worth noting that for the unprecedented roll call of artists Marsalis might care to name, there is also an unprecedented roll call of names erased from the wider histories associated with jazz and improvisation, an erasure never more evident than in Ken Burns's absurdly selective and limited version of jazz history for PBS: the ten-episode miniseries/documentary *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*, A General Motors Mark of Excellence Presentation.⁶

There are several narratives buried in Marsalis's account. One is that it was democracy that allowed for the explosion of creativity that gave America its greatest art form. This is an entirely skewed rescripting of a much more complex story that begins with slavery, moves through the struggle for abolition, traverses the Jim Crow era, swings into the Civil Rights Movement, and finds, perhaps, its apotheosis in the shameful US governmental response to the disaster in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (2005)—or perhaps in the earlier beating of Rodney King (1991), or in any number of incidents that confirm that there is still a struggle for basic equal rights in a country that regularly refers to itself as the greatest democracy on the planet. As recently as 2010, the young African American trumpeter Scott experienced the following episode in New Orleans, where he was born and raised:

During Jazz Fest in New Orleans, trumpeter Christian Scott was driving home after playing a late-night gig with Soulive when he noticed a car trailing him by the Claiborne Street underpass. At first he was afraid he was going to be the target of a robbery. When the sirens came on, he realized he was being pulled over. In the moments that followed, he says, nine police officers drew their guns on him, and he was dragged from the car and thrown on the hood. Not wanting to become the next Amadou Diallo, he suggested the officer get his ID out of his wallet while he kept his hands in the air.

"Oh we got one of these types of niggers," quipped the cop.

In the course of reacting to the use of that word, the slight, 25-year-old musician was told to shut up unless he wanted his mother to pick him up "from the morgue."

[. . .]

Two years later, Scott is fighting back—and he's using music to do it.

"It stands for Ku Klux Police Department," he said, explaining "K.K.P.D.," the title of the first track on his new album, *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow*. (Odell 26, 28)

Contrary to Marsalis's myth of democracy enabling creativity, Scott's story tells us precisely the opposite story, with the abuse of power leading to a creative response, albeit fairly benign and sublimated. The politics of titling a piece of music are perhaps of less interest than is the material history of what generated the musical gesture. Anthony Braxton has argued, in an interview with Kenneth Ansell in 1977, that "if I write a composition and call it 'Brackie's Blues – The Sun Comes Over the Mountain' it really had nothing to do with what I was really doing. It might be something that you could refer to as a title but it really wasn't anything to do with the actual music" (cited in Lock 164). A political title does not necessarily guarantee that the music itself is political or an embodiment of a political practice. Naming a jazz tune in an obliquely political manner is unlikely to have any significant impact in the broader social sphere. And the paratextual rhetoric associated with the Scott feature tells us (in the eyes of the DownBeat sub-editor, if nowhere else) that Scott is 'showing his teeth,' a comment in sync with how DownBeat is marketing Scott as a rebellious young lion in their cover story. Nonetheless, Scott's comments about the title of his piece remind us how

instrumental music can be conceived with political, critical intention, however limited the political outcome of such a naming might be. Evocation and embedded, allusive articulations of persistent racism have a politics of memory, witnessing, and testimony to them no doubt—much like how the extended interview with Wadada Leo Smith in this issue shows how he strategically uses titles assigned to nonverbal musical forms to evoke relations between specific moments in the Civil Rights Movement that he addresses in *Ten Freedom Summers*. So, the Scott incident, in spite of all the qualifications I list above, tells us that democracy, as fellow New Orleans trumpeter Marsalis conceives it, has either failed or has morphed into something other than what it proclaims to be. It is the struggle against these sorts of incidents, let alone wildly inaccurate generalizations about democracy, that is at stake in the tension between Marsalis's mythmaking and Scott's street-level experience of racism.

The struggle for democracy against oppression and injustice in an America that already considers itself fully democratic (in the "land of the free and home of the brave") is at the heart of the creative achievements that Marsalis rightly praises in the second part of his narrative. Again, to give equality and social justice the name of democracy is perhaps to distort and limit what these concepts actually intend beyond political, institutional, and juridical structures. Might these concepts signify more broadly in ways that ultimately resist simplistic political definition? Might they have a creative dimension that is largely unquantifiable or unattainable except by expressive (improvisatory) means? What might it mean to envision justice and equality in terms of everyday life, in terms of quotidian expressions of being human that cross a range of artistic and improvisatory forms and activities? Is it not dangerous, smacking of the end of history politics, to posit any political form as fully realized, when the most realized expression of what politics needs to be is in a constant, evolving critical relationship with itself in order to be most true to its underlying principles?

II. "Something More": Improvisation and Its Politics

In *The Mayor of Punkville*, the eminent American improviser William Parker, "speaks about the salvation of humanity through music," (n.p.) writing,

Now when I use the word "improvisation," I do not mean just making up a solo on the spot as regulated by some academic music guide. Nor does it have to do with chance. On the contrary, improvisation is a precise science that is guided by love of every human being that exists. It goes way beyond conventional science or math [. . .] It is the transforming of the psyche. The rain filling the pot. It is not about making anything up. It is about making the dead come back to life. One song for the plants, one song for Jimmy Greyfox. One for the Oglala. One for the clay people who live in Wintiland. One for the people in Cambodia. Improvisation is a nuclear bomb fueled by love, its fallout is the wispy whipping wind caused by the flight of the eagle's wings when I walk through a field of flowers, and I can smell music. (4)

Parker (figuratively) explodes conventional takes on what improvisation is and expands its frame of reference in ways that subvert simplistic narratives that turn "jazz" into an avatar of American democracy. Improvisation is not taking a conventional solo, nor is it a chance occurrence. Instead, it is a "precise science [. . .] guided by love of every human being that exists," a transformation, a redemptive form of creation that resurrects the dead, a sound that speaks to all peoples as well as to the natural environments in which they live. This definition reclaims improvisation from both academic discourses and appropriative political contexts—and it re-appropriates the trope of science (with its Latin etymology in the word *scire*, to know) to a different kind of knowing, in the same way that Parker's text problematically rescripts the nuclear bomb in terms that are radically other.

Parker's insights reinstate improvisation in the realm of things that matter but that are fundamentally beyond quantification except in the evocations of sound that respond to what is unsayable. What might it mean to further develop a politics rooted in this understanding of improvisation, coming from an influential voice in improvisatory musicking? Parker's words are always already political, his improvisatory aesthetics always already connected to a way of seeing the world that has political implications. Moreover, Parker's words remind us that the creative voices of improvising artists *must* be included in imagining alternative visions of how we can make community a space where difference and respect for our contingent relations to each other, to all things, to the environment that sustains us all, is enacted in creative and enduring ways.

Parker's rhetoric, then, gets at a specific improvisatory ideology in which spiritual transformation, contingent human and natural relations, and the bringing to life of those who have passed before us are all at stake. Improvisation enacts, for Parker, *this* set of meanings in this particular *written* articulation of what improvisation is. But, it must be said, that this is one set of meanings—arising from a particular set of histories, social contexts, and cultural formations associated with Parker—cannot possibly contain the irreducible nature of improvisatory discourses to exceed any attempt to fix its meanings. So while some may find this vision powerful and convincing, others may find it an empty, romanticized metaphor that problematically appropriates and rescripts the language of atomic warfare for

purposes that, however laudable, have little to no effect in the realm beyond the immediate improvisatory musicking contexts associated with Parker. Is improvisation really a “precise science” when so much of the discourse around how it is produced relies on non-scientific (that is, non-empirical), exploratory articulations, that however precise or imprecise musically, address random, unscripted, risky, and unpredictable collisions of sound and affect that give the music its vitality and power? Is a “nuclear bomb fueled by love” an appropriate metaphor for addressing improvisatory musicking’s capacity to express community relations that are not necessarily always a function of harmony and mutual empathy, but a function of tense disagreement or competing ideas struggling for ascendancy? How wary need we be of any and all prescriptive notions that restrict what improvisation means to a particular set of metaphors, a particular ideological formation, a singular set of histories? Whatever one may think, Parker’s insistence that improvisation has wider meaning in the world, makes larger claims to articulating relations that are not just musical, is indicative of a musical form that speaks beyond its immediate apparent confines to the *polis*, the array of relations that constitute human community and human knowing.

The notion that artists have something to contribute to discussions of governance and political problem solving beyond music is not new. Anderson shows how

An original musical production [. . .] by Dave and Lola Brubeck exposed the contrast between State Department claims that jazz—and by extension democracy—brought people together regardless of race or ideology, and unabated segregation in the American South. Recorded in the fall of 1961 and performed at the Monterey Jazz Festival a year later, *The Real Ambassadors* centered around Louis Armstrong’s experiences as a cultural envoy [. . .] In “King for a Day,” Armstrong proposed a basement session, the jazz equivalent of a summit conference, as his solution to international problems. World leaders would have to find a common beat and strive for harmony. (45)

Might this be at least a partial meaning for improvocracy, especially if one of the features of improvisation is its endless ability to be (im)productive, to generate new ideas via sustainable techniques of encounter and exploration (such as the prolific musical outpourings of Anthony Braxton, Sun Ra, Henry Threadgill, John Zorn, among many others)? What might it mean to transfer musical principles of harmony and rhythm to political structures of debate, governance, conflict resolution, and so forth? What might it mean to unleash improvisatory forms based on the simultaneous deployment of in-dependence and inter-dependence as a premise from which to construct meaningful political discourse?

Again, specific contexts do indeed matter in assigning meanings to improvisation and democracy. In the case of the latter word, democracy is often touted (as per Marsalis’s comments cited above) as the political system most aligned with the aesthetics of jazz and, by extension, with the aesthetics of improvisation. The word democracy derives from the Greek *dēmokratia*: *dēmos* meaning the “people” and *-kratia* meaning “power or rule.” The etymology is sufficiently loose to obscure the fact that the word democracy in its original sense does not necessarily specify which people have power and with what values, or how they might exercise their rule. The upshot is that what “we” might mean by democracy is very much up for grabs, a meaning meant to be made and remade in the specific embodiment and collision of values, aesthetics, political forms, ideology, and visions of rights and responsibilities associated with both individuals and communities in shifting and contingent relation to each other.

Similarly, politics, with its derivation from the Greek *politikos*: *politēs* meaning “citizen” and *polis* meaning “city,” originally associated agency with the sixth- and fifth-century BCE Athens that gave rise to the roots of democratic practice.⁷ Politics was, in this context, at once exclusive—limited to those designated, in less than egalitarian ways, citizens of the city-state—and local, limited to vastly smaller organizations of power than what we associate with politics today (think of the G8 or the G20, the former Soviet Bloc, the Eurozone, NAFTA, and so forth).

In such a frame, the struggle for a democratic politics aligned with what improvisation has to teach about conflict resolution, agency, empowerment, and collective dialogue remains to be fought, imagined in novel and dissident (dissonant) ways and compelled into being. As percussionist and critic Rob Wallace summarizes,

Mainstream jazz critics and musicians have claimed that jazz is a kind of American democracy in musical form (in fact, the US government had already made this latter claim during the Cold War). America’s simultaneous desire for and fear of improvisation, borne out on the bandstand and the battlefield demonstrates that incorporating improvisation into the democratic process is a challenge at the heart of the American psyche yet to be accomplished. (87)

This comment conceives of improvisation as the social practice of the yet-to-be in the here-and-now: the assumption is that somehow improvisation is not part of the democratic process (it has yet to be “incorporated”), when in fact it may well be, just in ways that don’t necessarily align with democracy as Wallace sees it. Do we really need to make democracy more improvisatory or improvisation more democratic? Or is this just playing with a tedious semantics that fixes both ways of being into a predictable deadlock that constrains what each might constructively mean to the other? The struggle here is for the meaning of improvisation as much as it is for the meaning of democracy. By mythologizing the “American psyche” in relation to improvisation and jazz, is there not a danger that such progressive analysis will actually cater to highly conventional nationalist politics and move away from the very specific acts and circumstances in which real improvisatory acts are allied with specific political outcomes, many of them transnational if not global in their dimension and circumstance?

Exploring how deep underlying aesthetic practices like improvisation (or adaptation) align with political practices is a very, very tricky matter. Wallace suggests, “Perhaps the choice is actually between [. . .] learning to improvise against violence, rather than with violence. Art would be meaningless if it did not move us—and music moves us, quite literally, whether it is ‘political’ or not. We can let it explode randomly, like a bomb in the crowd, or we can try to understand its contours as we feel it moving through bodies and history” (89). To rephrase Wallace’s insights as a question, is it possible or even desirable to position musical affect with creative politics, and if so, how?

Wallace’s argument, like Frith’s aside about having the conversation on how ideology and music intertwine, reminds us that there is indeed a relationship there: music is a social practice that can have political meaning within the bodies and histories of those making music. Yet Wallace’s assumption that improvisation need necessarily align against violence is predicated on ideal circumstances where non-violence is viable as a means to political change. What happens when it is not? What happens when improvisation links dissidence and dissonance to political violence? Who determines the threshold for crossing over from non-violence into violence?

Who determines the ethical compass of an improvisation? Who determines the political affect produced by an improvisation?

Intangible exchanges are part of the languages and histories of improvisation. How do we quantify them in political terms? Should we bother? Do they matter?

I would argue that they do indeed matter and that these intangible histories play a significant role in providing alternatives to atrophied forms, aesthetic or political, that have lost the power of self-critique or that have become narcissistically infatuated with their own reflection at the expense of moving in new directions. Certain specific manifestations of improvisatory art carry with them specific political valences, like the African American struggle for civil rights in a democratic, but racist, American context. And that there are looser parallels to be drawn between jazz and democracy has already become an anodyne truism. Witness Marsalis’s comments to this effect, or jazz bassist and commentator Kabir Sehgal, who argues, “The parallel of jazz with democracy works for two reasons. First, jazz is a music of negotiation, conversation, reconciliation, and *making* [. . .] The second reason that the jazz-as-democracy metaphor is instructive is because of the invitational spirit of jazz. Jazz musicians come from all walks of life and demonstrate that power can flow in the direction of anyone” (20-21). Broadly true, perhaps, but something that might be said of any number of musical or artistic genres (think of fringe theatre, think of the blues, think of some forms of classical music). The mythmaking implicit in these sorts of utterances is also worth highlighting, as they are more generally in those who would uncritically link democracy to improvisatory practices: jazz’s invitational spirit is highly variant, as anyone who has tried to break into a particular scene can attest to; and negotiation is something that certain kinds of jazz leaders with specific visions generally find suspect (think of Marsalis or Pat Metheny, even though the two are in very different camps with regard to their visions of jazz). These sorts of observations, then, are based more generally on using the powerful affect produced by great art forms to uplift political discourse to something more effective. In that sense, politics needs jazz much more than jazz needs politics. That said, we must be very careful to understand that the specific use and meaning of improvisation can be deployed in a host of different ways.

Edgar Landgraf notes, in a discussion of influential German author Heinrich von Kleist’s ideas on improvisation—deriving in part from Kleist’s essay “On the gradual development of thoughts in the process of speaking” that addresses unforeseeable results and spontaneity in their relation to individual consciousness, free will, and political enlightenment—that “Kleist does not romanticize the subversive power of improvisation as a tool for social resistance [. . .] As an inventive doing, improvisation might be just as effective in helping to maintain an existing order than in overturning it” (123). Landgraf further argues that Kleist

reveals improvisation to be not about unbridled spontaneity, freedom, or the utter absence of rules, but about a certain mode of engaging, appropriating, and staging rules. Kleist thus challenges oppositions that continue to guide the observational practices of contemporary studies of improvisation, which [. . .] understand improvisation in opposition to laws, rules, fixed structures, or repetition. For Kleist, this is not an either/or proposition, but rather it is the interchange of practice and law, performance and text, innovation and tradition [. . .] In his theoretical and his literary writing, Kleist expands the applicability of improvisation to include all spheres of human interaction, presenting inventiveness and the ability to improvise as a basic requirement for the assertion of power and the formation of agency. (115)

So another paradigm for conceiving improvisation, here securely located within Eurocentric discourses that are far removed from the Afro-diasporic contexts usually associated with “jazz” improvisation. In this conception, improvisation is merely another way of deploying a different set of contingencies and expectations with outcomes related to agency and the “assertion of power.” Neither necessarily resistant nor necessarily aligned with convention, improvisation is, it would appear, what you make of it in the “inventive doing” that always remains to be embodied.

One way of seeing this embodied doing in political terms is through the idea that improvisation is always, necessarily, co-generative: between the performers performing; between the performers and the audience listening; between that iteration of spectacle and wider social configurations, larger communities in which the iteration has meaning; between the specific historical, lived contexts of all concerned. The point is that meaning remains to be made in the moment out of co-generative agencies. All improvisations start out of this initial premise as Marcel Cobussen, Henrik Frisk, and Bart Weijland’s show in their discussion of the field of musical improvisation (FMI):

Improvisation can as well be social, political, religious, gendered, racial, spatial, physical, and so on. The becoming political of free improvisation and the becoming racial of Afrological approaches are only two very obvious examples. The FMI is thus without central points, organizing principles, stable hierarchies. Nodality instead of centrality. It is a composition that continually shifts as a consequence of the activities of the (f)actors that are working in and on it. The FMI is generative. (4)

It is, in other words, precisely because improvisation is generative in ways that potentially destabilize hierarchy, that unsettle fixed narratives, that it provides a way of modeling alternatives via embodied actions and agencies. Its potential creative freedom—hard won and a constant end in and of itself in improvisatory making—is its greatest asset, aesthetically and politically. The spectacle of improvisation begins with a fundamental question addressed by and to the improvisers: “*what do you hear in this specific context and what do you have to say here and now?*” Out of that question arises a full range of embodied creative acts, from the most banal to the most inspiring. But also out of that question comes a responsibility to answer the question to the best of one’s ability in that moment. The question, perhaps, is the point of origin for any act of responsible self-definition that is other-oriented and exhibits creative agency beyond the aesthetic. What might political subjectivity look like if the same question was asked of each of us in that realm?

Many improvising musicians have provided answers to this question. Amiri Baraka comments, in his introduction to Sun Ra’s poetry collection *This Planet is Doomed*, that “Ra was so far out because he had the true self-consciousness of the Afro American intellectual artist revolutionary. He knew our historic ideology and socio-political consciousness was freedom. It is an aesthetic and social dynamic. We think it is good and beautiful!” (vii). Ra in other words cannot be reduced or contained by simplistic assumptions about his music apart from wider contexts that included a canny, radical sociopolitical consciousness. Ra himself, in his own words, consistently enunciated a critical politics inseparable from his aesthetics. In his cosmic self-fashioning that became an elaborate critique of racism and black alienation within American democracy, Ra offers an ethicopolitical alternative to what he perceived as the failure of democracy:

I’m telling people that they’ve tried everything and now they have to try *mythocracy*. They’ve got a *democracy*, a *theocracy*—but they should try a *mythocracy*. The mythocracy is what you never came to be that you *should* be. For instance, as a child you had a lot of dreams about something pure, something you wanted to be. But you let yourself get compromised by people who were saying, “Go this way, do this.” Finally, for the sake of money, you failed. Just like America.

When this country was first set up, these people talked about independence. They wanted independence for everybody, including the so-called slaves. But the English got in there and said something like, “If you pass it that way we’re not going to finance you. We’re not gonna give you any money.” So these people had to decide whether they were really gonna have a country where every man was free or whether they would have to compromise for the sake of a dollar. What did they do? The founding fathers of this country

compromised for the sake of a dollar, so you really don't have a democracy here. Because they compromised, when they put the Liberty Bell up there the Creator cracked it. He cracked it to show you that it was not solid, it was not right. ("Your Only Hope Now Is A Lie" 113-14)

Ra's exceptionalist mythmaking about his Saturnalian origins, his politically conscious Afrofuturist aesthetics, his insistence on taking the autonomy gained from mythocracy and self-authorizing to become as "you *should* be"—all have deeply political implications in terms of both African American and more global struggles against discrimination and injustice. As an alternative to a cracked sense of liberty (standing in as a metaphor for bogus, triumphalist narratives of freedom), as an alternative to a sense of democracy that had been leached of meaning for reasons of economic greed, Ra offered a potent, highly productive aesthetics in which free improvisation played a significant role. Ra's persona literally embodied and modeled—*made* spectacular—an ethico-aesthetic practice in which improvisation and political consciousness were mutually co-generative. And it must be remembered that Sun Ra is an exceptional case of musical practice ineluctably linked to a politics: the uniqueness of Ra's approach, which saw little to no separation between his lived life and his musical and artistic practice, tends to highlight the thinness of many other claims to be living politics through musical interventions.

Might this example be one instance of how to resolve the problem of what improvisation might mean politically, of identifying the "something more" that improvisation may potentially bring to political discourses? Might this tension, between simultaneously embodying musical and political practices and musical discourses that lay claim to a politics while remaining at the level of metaphor, be what improvocracy means? How to address the world of difference that exists between making music and doing politics, between claiming to be political and the act of being political? Cultural critic Alan Stanbridge writes:

In a discussion session with his collaborator Pierre Hébert as part of the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium in 2006, [Bob] Ostertag argued that involvement in 'politicized' forms of music and creative activity remains distinct from direct political engagement and action. As Ostertag suggests, a piece of improvised music given a 'political' title remains music, not politics. The key point here is the nature and extent of the 'political' rhetoric and claims made by those involved in what are essentially artistic pursuits. (10)

To further complicate this perspective it is imperative to understand that embodied artistic expression that challenges normative discourses can have political valences, can be a form of political doing, an enactment of a politics. But measuring such an action's actual political impact, and by this I mean a direct re-allocation of resources or a pronounced shift in policy or a change in legislation that produces new rights for the disenfranchised remains highly problematic.

How the affect and intention embedded in performance translates to a wider world of thinking and doing politics is fraught. For instance, one cannot dissociate the impact of jazz performers in feeding the flame of the American Civil Rights Movement, articulating its principles for audiences, and in many cases taking direct political action through participation in lobby groups, political marches and speeches, fundraising, and the like. But how does one situate often diffuse and marginalized improvisatory performance practices in the post-Civil Rights era in the context of Stanbridge's notion that "it becomes clear that more challenging forms of contemporary jazz and improvised music remain resolutely minority tastes, which tends to circumscribe rather severely the utopian and far-reaching claims made regarding the development of 'new social relations' or 'the transformation of societies' based primarily on free jazz and the avant-garde. This represents, perhaps, a somewhat less romantic vision of the consequences of marginality" (10)? Margins harbor potential seeds for new ideas, resistant practices, and contrarian formations that while marginal have the capacity to move beyond the margin, to translate to greater effect. As a nesting place for incubating such materials, then, the margin is a remarkable resource. But, as Stanbridge's argument clarifies, the margin is also the space of "minority tastes" and over-stating the political utility of such tastes is a danger if these do not translate into something more.

There are multiple permutations to how music is connected to political form, as American pianist Brad Mehldau argues in a persuasive essay:

Placing Deed above the Word means privileging art above politics. Politics becomes just another whim of the fertile imagination—a form of art. Like art, politics will celebrate its freedom to create, independently of any antecedent linguistic authority. The danger in this new climate is that politics can lose its normalizing, regulating role as a "social morality." What is accepted as "moral" for a group of people must be established through some form of consensus. Usually there will be an appeal to a discourse or text concerning morality that already exists. If that pre-existing law is ignored, however dogmatic it may be, there is now the potential for a whole other kind of tyranny. The criteria for a good politics is now based solely on how aesthetically

pleasing it is, how exciting and alluring it sounds and feels. Politicians are not accountable for their actual policy, but are judged more as artists—judged on their rhetorical finesse, on their ability to transport their listeners. In this environment, they can (literally) get away with murder.

[. . .]

Bracketing out politics from music is not just foolish idealism, then, but potentially an act of complicity. I now face the disconcerting prospect that my very enjoyment of music is always charged with political implications, whether I like it or not. My immediate reaction is, “No way!” If I’m somehow politically accountable when I listen to music, then it instantly loses its emancipative thrust for me, i.e., its temporary freedom from the specificity of language. That desire for music to remain autonomous from political discourse, though, inadvertently implies a political stance—a kind of leave-me-alone, lazy libertarianism: “I don’t care what they’re marching about on the streets. I just want to listen to Coltrane!”

Music is an ideological whore. She will play for any team, as Burgess/Kubrick showed so well in *A Clockwork Orange*: The famous “Ode to Joy” theme from the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony—that paragon of Enlightenment ideals, with text from Schiller—is the soundtrack that accompanies the sociopath protagonist of the story, Alex, as he rapes and murders. (3)

Mehldau’s comments remind us how dangerous it is to aestheticize politics in ways that associate aesthetic techniques (like “rhetorical finesse”) with affect, which in turn allows for tyranny and easily manipulated political subjects. The political uses of aesthetics can also turn substance into empty spectacle, policy and material outcomes into ephemeral entertainments that mask the very real allocation of resources and the very real political actions that produce effects in the world—from genocide to poverty, from serial warfare to vastly uneven distributions of wealth and power. Mehldau’s comments echo Frank Zappa’s clairvoyant insight that “*Politics is the Entertainment Branch of Industry*” (322). At the same time, Mehldau is attentive to how politicizing music disrupts music’s distinctive quality to step away from language, to be emancipatory in how it refuses reductive linguistic meaning, to be autonomous to itself and nothing else, to be emotive in ways that transcend linguistic limits of expression.⁸ Yet the “ideological whor[ing]” of music also compromises its supposed aesthetic purity and its autonomy. Mehldau’s self-critical observations are important for how they show the potential minefield that is any discussion of aesthetic form in political terms. Music is made in specific historical and political contexts and often responds to these contexts; music is a form of social practice, but at the same time, its uses and meanings occupy a space of intangibility and ambiguity as potentially emancipatory as it is exploitative. Eric Porter’s discussion of Nat Hentoff and other jazz critics who understood that jazz “came out of a particular political context and should not be devalued for reflecting it” (178) is a useful reminder that even a music detached from political contexts is itself potentially political. As Porter summarizes, “Art was not beyond ideology, Hentoff argued; even the ‘evasion’ of politics reflected a certain ‘attitude’” (178).

Meaning, in other words, always remains to be made in specific musical and political contexts. Is this a starting point for imagining what improvocracy might be?

Agency and power may well traverse all forms of improvisatory making. But the *kind* of agency, the *form* of power, are profoundly at issue in any theory of improvisation. One person’s agency is another person’s irrelevance. One person’s presumed power is another’s impotence. Many improvising musicians today may see themselves as conceptually powerful; as active agents in a fecund creative process; as spiritually, emotionally, cognitively puissant when deploying their improvisatory skills. Yet how do those skills transfer to a wider public sphere? Is it even fair to expect such a transfer to be thinkable or worth making?

The political consequences of musical form and aesthetics have in some circles been depicted as without merit, a delusional fantasy, or worse, wholly contradictory to the essence of music itself, which has nothing to teach beyond its own transcendence (of language, of politics, of social practice).

And yet the very nature of music begins as embodied act, is rooted in the social and historical practices that give rise to embodied acts. Improvised music is especially tied to embodiment and interaction: communal forms of musical exploration made in the here and now before an audience awaiting surprise, provocation, uncertainty, collaboration, dissidence, and inspiration. All improvisation entails negotiation of some sort: whether with self, other, audience, instrument, or the circumstances surrounding a particular performance. Is there something to be learned from how improvisers approach these complex negotiations that address difference, dissonance, and in-the-moment problem solving?

Inherent in the question is the danger of assuming that improvisation is necessarily always progressive, community-oriented, or a worthy model for anything other than itself. But even so, why have so many improvisers and critics writing in the emergent field of improvisation studies pointed to underlying qualities evident in improvisatory discourse that are indeed progressive, community-oriented, capable of generating a sustained critical response, and providing alternatives to dominant narratives? English percussionist and author Edwin Prévost, in a bracing discussion of the jazz traditionalism associated with Wynton Marsalis, notes how “Black American culture is important because of the resilience, energy and imagination of a people who have long suffered disadvantages. Their struggle is part of a universal effort. But the narrow focus of the struggle ‘against’ is too often couched entirely in terms of the dominant ideology [. . .] Lester Bowie, and others equally beyond the pale for Marsalis, see jazz as a way to shout against the limitations of Western liberalism” (126). In other words, the very political frame of liberalism that is associated with democratic undertakings is seen as too limiting by improvising musicians whose music can be understood, in part, as a response to those limitations. This is especially the case when democracy slips over into neoliberalism, what Prévost refers to as the “New Right’s drive to foster possessive individualism” (125), a pattern increasingly evident in recent history.

Music is always already potentially political, located in a web of social, historical, personal circumstances that reflect upon its location. Music measures out sound as a reminder to other discourses that linguistic meaning has its limits in giving full expression to creative principles that exceed language. The problem is not so much that music must be made more political, but rather that the political must be more musical, more creative, more aligned with what it means to be human and at the margins, more ready to explore alternatives to technocratic forms of stagnated institutions and ossified visions of political and economic self-interest and expediency that benefit the few. There is little music can learn from traditional politics that it has not already expressed or taught itself. To limit musical meaning to only politics is to circumvent the irreducibly rich play of meaning in musical iteration. Or to put it differently, since there are real dangers in blithely assuming that music and politics are somehow analogous, or even that interconnecting the two is desirable: the end of music is essentially a creative end, one that transcends reductive views of what it means to be human, one that sets the terms of being human in relation to expressive, collaborative visions that literally and figuratively sound creation. Music always surpasses politics as an expression of deep-seated human creative potential. Its sonic explorations address the enigma of being outside of language. Aesthetics precedes politics. Sense precedes critical and discursive interpretation. Sound precedes language. As Ornette Coleman puts it in an interview with Jacques Derrida, “I think that sound has a much more democratic relationship to information, because you don’t need the alphabet to understand music” (319-20).⁹ The grammar of politics struggles to rise to the creative principles and sonic outcomes evident in the most achieved and diverse forms of musicking practiced globally.

Politics, especially as it is generally practiced across a range of political forms, is not necessarily creative, except in expeditious self-oriented ways that serve ends that are neither necessarily creative nor structured on principles that benefit or serve the widest conception of the common good. Think of the recent histories associated with the ongoing neoliberal privatization of the public commons: the oligopolistic acquisition that centres power in a narrow bandwidth of privilege in which obscene wealth and resources are concentrated, or the managed democracies in which largely illusory voice is given to a citizenry increasingly disenfranchised from the decision making associated with allocating material resources for military expenditures or industries that play a major role in degrading an increasingly fragile environment.

Neither is politics necessarily uncreative. As a practice oriented to achieving ends that allocate resources, produce laws, align interests, create institutions, and address pressing problems, politics can be remarkably dynamic and effective. Consider the Civil Rights Movement and the many political leaders and activists who resolutely came together to produce progressive political change, or Mohandas Gandhi’s remarkable political leadership based on non-violence and civil disobedience that led to India’s independence from British rule. In both examples highly creative political undertakings based on pragmatic real-time principles led to significant, progressive changes.¹⁰ It is, in other words, dangerous to stereotype the inherent potential to create meaning in either improvisatory or political forms. The underlying principles of improvisation teach us that.

That said, politics can and does (regularly) cause harm. Music does not—at least not in the sense of allocating massive resources toward war, or of legislating unjust laws, or of producing the political conditions that allow for oppression. A graffiti sprayed on a median I walk past regularly bleakly states, “Politics is misery.” If politics is misery and indeed it too often is, what might be said of music? What might be said of the most exploratory forms of improvisatory practice seeking to expand the range of human creative vocabularies beyond their current state? Improvised music, too, can be difficult, can cause physical discomfort, can test our capacity to listen, can shake easily won ideas of what is comfortable or acceptable.

Implicit in what I mean by improvocracy is that improvised musics always already have embedded in their most evolved practices creative forms of social organization. These may be based on non-violent, community oriented, expressive outcomes but they can (and should) be challenging to forms and situations that have lost the ability to transmute as circumstances change. Can the best of political action deploy similar principles? As in music, sometimes dissonance is more important, more productive, than consonance. In that sense, it is not so much desirable for music to rise to the level of politics as it is for politics to rise to the state of music. Can politics transcend its own narrow, self-definition, which largely excludes artists from decision-making, and substitute in its place more broadly based principles based on what I am calling—playfully and tentatively—improvocracy?

At the beginning of this editorial I juxtapose Sun Ra's expansive intuition of music as sometimes becoming more than itself with Derek Bailey's more guarded sense of the limited importance of improvisation. The two statements stand in enigmatic relationship to each other, perhaps in the same way that improvisation stands in relation to politics. Tracey Nicholls's admonition to think in terms of practical inseparability as opposed to conceptual distinctness is useful here. In her pertinent new book, she notes that "The ethical, the political, and the aesthetic can be analyzed as distinct considerations within an artistic or musical contribution, *but* we should not accept that any of them can be addressed in isolation from the others in any sustained fashion that would give it priority in our judgments of the work" (98). So there is something to be learned from acknowledging, as Nicholls does, the practical inseparability of ethics, politics, and aesthetics.

Might improvocracy be a way of sustaining these three forms of embodiment in constant, shifting relation to each other, of challenging us to find more creative, co-generative ways to conceive of them as practically inseparable, mutually pervasive forms of human potential? If we are to achieve what Nicholls refers to as a "richer notion of political life," one where the "inclusion of many, and diverse, perspectives in the debates [. . .] will ultimately drive public policy and determine the structuring (or restructuring) of political institutions" (54), then what can improvisation teach us? Nicholls argues, "performing one's membership in political community requires skills and commitments similar to those demanded by membership in an improvising community" (54). How does that insight impact Sun Ra's vision that "sometimes music becomes more than music" and Bailey's terse, if modest, declamation that improvisation "has such a limited power of communication"?

Again . . . improvocracy? The sense that improvised musicking has more to teach us about other forms of social practice—but also the sense that improvisation's limited play in the world beyond its own borders needs to be addressed.

Let's not place unreasonable and restrictive expectations on what improvisation can and cannot accomplish politically. To do so is to foreclose on the very unexpected possibilities inherent in improvisatory discourses and practices—not to mention the ways in which improvisation as an aesthetic practice at once potentially includes and transcends the political. As Stanley Crouch reminds us, "jazz is an art in which improvisation declares an aesthetic rejection of the preconceptions that stifle individual and collective invention" (162).¹¹

This comment, let us remember, comes from a hardcore jazz traditionalist.

And the implications of such a thought?

Let us be ceaselessly inventive and imaginative in the ways that improvisation has modeled for us.

Let us not stifle invention when it comes to political forms and practices that always remain to be made and remade within the contexts of historical contingencies where improvisation has had a say—and needs to have *more* of a say. Let us not pretend that all improvisation is necessarily political or translates into direct political action.

Let us not pretend that improvisation cannot become a form of directed political action or that its embodiment of an irreducible practice of questioning and tense resistance to normative discourses does not have potential political valences.

Let us not substitute assumptions about doing politics with actual directed action that produces material outcomes.

The situation is evolving and needs to come into being here and now.

It needs to be embodied in ways that make a difference.

It needs to be debated in ways that allow for the unpredictable alternative, the unthought solution that arises in the moment of improvisatory inspiration, balanced precariously between independence and interdependence.

There is always *something more* to be learned in this moment in which the dynamic of co-generative, improvisatory acts is present. As Sun Ra reminds in the first epigraph to this essay, "*sometimes music becomes more than music.*"

What might that "something" sometimes be?

At the core of that thought, perhaps, lies the basis for both an idealized and a pragmatic vision of the improvisation of politics, the politics of improvisation.

Might living in this state of dynamic, critical interrogation with the world around us hint at what it might mean to be improvocratic?

Notes

¹ This editorial was written in response to two circumstances. One was an interview, featured in this volume, with Wadada Leo Smith on the recent release of his Civil Rights-inspired *Ten Freedom Summers*. The other was an extended discussion on improvisation and democracy in the ICASP Reading Group (2011) led by postdoctoral fellow Mark Laver. I am deeply grateful to Smith, Laver, and the members of the ICASP Reading Group for sharing their ideas with me. I'm especially indebted to Joe Sorbara, who gave me a close, critical reading of a draft of this editorial that was extremely useful as I worked through some of its key ideas. I'd also like to thank Alan Stanbridge who gave a later draft of the essay several insightful and contrarian readings that were hugely helpful and invigorating. Sincere gratitude to the members of Morning Music—Ben Grossman, Susanna Hood, and Scott Thomson—for the wealth of their insights into musicking generally; and to Lewis Melville for his playful skepticism as I mooted many of the ideas presented here through his astute critical faculties. As a general principle for writing the essay I have tried to foreground comments by performer musicians and musician critics/authors as primary guides to shaping the tenor of the argument.

² Kevin Gaines situates *Black, Brown, and Beige* in Ellington's "self-conscious construction of historically situated narratives of African-American group consciousness as part of a progressive, antiracist agenda during World War II [. . .] indeed, racialized, musical categories, and his own descriptions of the uniqueness of his musical project in this period were crucial to his participation in his era's struggles for racial and social justice. Ellington's activities within World War II Popular Front culture accompanied a broader movement that laid the foundation for black freedom struggles and interracial cooperation within the movement" (587).

³ Frank Zappa scathingly says "Any composition (or improvisation) [that] remains 'consonant' and 'regular' throughout is, for me, equivalent to watching a movie with only 'good guys' in it, or eating cottage cheese" (181).

⁴ It is useful to read this list in conjunction with Resolution 57, introduced by John Conyers Jr. (a Michigan Democrat and the second longest serving incumbent member of the House of Representatives) and passed by the House of Representatives September 23, 1987 and by the Senate December 4, 1987:

Whereas, jazz has achieved preeminence throughout the world as an indigenous American music and art form, bringing to this country and the world a uniquely American musical synthesis and culture through the African-American experience and

1. makes evident to the world an outstanding artistic model of individual expression and democratic cooperation within the creative process, thus fulfilling the highest ideals and aspirations of our republic,
2. is a unifying force, bridging cultural, religious, ethnic and age differences in our diverse society,
3. is a true music of the people, finding its inspiration in the cultures and most personal experiences of the diverse peoples that constitute our Nation,
4. has evolved into a multifaceted art form which continues to birth and nurture new stylistic idioms and cultural fusions,
5. has had an historic, pervasive and continuing influence on other genres of music both here and abroad, and

6. has become a true international language adopted by musicians around the world as a music best able to express contemporary realities from a personal perspective;

Whereas, this great American musical art form has not yet been properly recognized nor accorded the institutional status commensurate with its value and importance;

Whereas, it is important for the youth of America to recognize and understand jazz as a significant part of their cultural and intellectual heritage;

Whereas, in as much as there exists no effective national infrastructure to support and preserve jazz;

Whereas, documentation and archival support required by such a great art form has yet to be systematically applied to the jazz field; and

Whereas, it is now in the best interest of the national welfare and all of our citizens to preserve and celebrate this unique art form;

Now, therefore be it Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), that it is the sense of the Congress that jazz is hereby designated as a rare and valuable national American treasure to which we should devote our attention, support and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood and promulgated. ("H.CON.RES 57")

The Conyers Resolution makes explicit connections between being African American and national identity, between democratic cooperation and the creative experience of jazz as "fulfilling the highest ideals and aspirations of our republic," and between the globalization of jazz and its ability "to express contemporary realities from a personal perspective." By contrast, Lewis's set of premises avoids the specific associations with American identity and democratic ideals, supplanting that discourse with a broader-based sense of improvisation that fosters cultural exchange, community development, and critical awareness of issues of postcoloniality, agency, and social mobilization.

⁵ Fred Moten, in his discussion of Amiri Baraka, argues that

what occurs in the New Black Music of the sixties [. . .] is the emergence of an art and thinking in which emotion and structure, preparation and spontaneity, individuality and collectivity can no longer be understood in opposition to one another. Rather the art itself resists any interpretation in which these elements are opposed, resists any designation, even those of the artists themselves, that depends on such oppositions. The primary problems here are that these oppositions can all be indexed to two others [. . .] that between improvisational composition and that between black and white. The question is whether the discourse that surrounds the music gets to the liberatory space the music opens. These oppositions form the conceptual apparatus Baraka uses to represent the music, but there is something in Baraka's language that remains unbounded by that representational-calculative thinking, something that places it under an immanent critique. That something is improvisation itself. (129-30)

The key point Moten gets at here is how improvisation undermines reductive, calculative discourses that circulate around the music. The problem then becomes how to sustain the liberatory aesthetics of the music in other forms of discourse, a problem I associate here with rethinking politics via improvisation.

⁶ I cite the full title of the series along with the sponsorship information to underline the way Burn's narrative fulfills a particularly corporate vision of jazz, one that aligns well with its conservative view of the music. As Keith Jarrett asked in a letter critiquing Burns to the *New York Times*:

Now that we've been put through the socio-economic radical forensics of a jazz-illiterate historian and a self-imposed jazz expert prone to sophomoric generalizations and ultra-conservative politically correct (for now) utterances, not to mention a terribly heavy-handed narration [. . .] and weepy-eyed nostalgic reveries, can we have some films about jazz by people who actually know and understand the music itself and are willing to deal comprehensively with the last forty years of this richest of American treasures? (cited in Chris Parker)

A partial corrective to Burns's vision is presented in the four-episode series *Icons Among Us* (2009), directed by Lars Larson, Michael Rivoira, and Peter J. Voigt.

⁷ I would note that a significant history of other forms of political organization that might well align with democratic or social justice ideals generally gets set aside by this particular genealogy associated with Athens.

⁸ Eric Porter's discussion of multi-instrumentalist and improviser Yusef Lateef's 1970 instructional book, *Yusef Lateef's Method on How to Improvise Soul Music*, notes Lateef's rejection of improvised music as mere emotional expressionism: Lateef "considers the notion that improvisation is solely a product of emotion to be a primitivist misconception. 'The point is that the skilled improviser [sic] is not just a mechanical, emotional dispenser but an interpretive artist creating organically.' The term 'autopsychic,' then, not only describes the self-consciousness, emotional and spiritual depth, and physical abilities required of the successful improviser but also rejects a narrow definition of jazz as the product of emotion" (243-44).

⁹ As if to confirm this rupture between sound and language, critic Paul Watkins notes how "Ornette Coleman, who had recently befriended philosopher Jacques Derrida, invited the philosopher to perform an improvised duet with him at the 1997 Paris Jazz Festival. Derrida's philosophical spoken-word piece was to accompany the free jazz playing of Coleman. While Coleman was playing Derrida came onto the stage and began to read his free-style philosophical piece. Within moments he was booed off the stage."

¹⁰ I note that these examples are two of many other possible examples from many other sites globally. Rebecca Solnit, for instance, in discussing recent Mexican resistance movements, notes that "If the Zapatista arose from many long disasters, the society they created in their autonomous regions in Chiapas and that they propose in their globally circulated slogans and writings greatly resembles disaster communities. There is an emphasis on improvisation. 'Caminando preguntamos,' they say, or 'We walk asking questions.' Rather than dogma, they have inquiry as a core principle. There is an intense critique of hierarchy and *mandar obediencia*, or 'govern by obeying,' is also a recurrent theme, imperfectly realized" (180).

¹¹ In the same essay, Crouch cites Albert Murray's idea that "Improvisation is the ultimate human (i.e. heroic) endowment" (161) while also noting that "the demands on and the respect for the individual in the jazz band put democracy into aesthetic action [. . .] The improvising jazz musician must work right in the heat and the pressure of the moment, giving form and order in a mobile environment, where choices must be constantly assessed and reacted to in one way or another. The success of jazz is a victory for democracy, and a symbol of the aesthetic dignity, which is finally spiritual. That performers can achieve and express as they go about inventing music and meeting the challenge of the moment" (161).

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