

Tunes from Brainville: Improvised Jazz and/as Utopia

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Any discussion of utopia faces terminological challenges. These can in part be traced to the contradictory meanings that it was originally intended to convey: Thomas More coined the word as a “pun on good place/no place” (Levitas, “Be Realistic” 79). “Utopia” has had wildly different connotations in the various contexts in which it has been employed. For example, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels use “utopian” as a term of abuse against sectarian opponents and, ironically, reactionary politicians and intellectuals use “utopian” to denigrate Marxists for allegedly being out of touch with a supposedly fixed reality or human nature, if not for harbouring a dangerous fanaticism of the sort that will employ brutal and repressive means to achieve a desired end. On the other hand, writers such as Ernst Bloch, David Halpin, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Ruth Levitas regard the utopian imagination as an indispensable tool in struggles for freedom and social justice. While there may be some agreement that “utopia” refers to a perfect society or a near approximation of one, understandings of what constitutes such an ideal vary widely. Anarcho-primitivists, for instance, see utopia as a place without factories, automobiles, or mechanized agriculture whereas techno utopians imagine that developments in medicine, food production, energy, and communications can resolve illness, hunger, climate change, and state tyranny.

Nevertheless, some commonalities can be identified among differing perspectives of a just society. With the exception of Ayn Rand’s vision of a utopia of unfettered competition and individualism—which for many looks more like a dystopia—images of the just society tend to involve a far greater degree of social, political, and economic life taking place collectively than is common in contemporary capitalist societies. Utopia, I argue, can perhaps best be understood as a series of absences: of racism, of patriarchy, of heteronormativity, of classes, of alienating

labour, of environmental degradation, to name only a few. When I refer to “utopia” in this piece, what I have in mind are these absences, as well as the increase in communal activity that I just mentioned. However, my use of the term should also convey Levitas’ formulation: “If utopia is understood to as the expression of the desire for a better way of being, then it is perhaps a (sometimes) secularised version of the spiritual quest to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect with each other. It is a quest for wholeness, for being at home in the world” (“Looking for the Blue” 290). Levitas’ account assumes that smaller scale modes of conduct shape and are shaped by institutions and that the utopian cannot flourish in one of these at the exclusion of the other. In this sense, “utopia” refers not only to formal political arrangements but also to all sites of human relationships. It has both a material dimension and transcendent, quasi-theological properties.

In this piece, I argue that improvised jazz is utopian in all of these senses of the word. I say this for two main reasons. First, as a form characterized by a resistance to fixity, by spontaneity, and by experimentation, it enables the freewheeling, imaginative flights that are integral to utopian thinking and to radical politics itself. Improvised jazz, in the second place, is in multiple ways an embodiment of utopia. It is a collective practice that involves cultural workers taking control over that which they produce, and it offers glimpses of what is sometimes called a post-work society.

The Utopian Imagination

Art of any variety or media has been foremost among the locations at which utopian ideas are mapped, contested, revised, and lived. Kelley, who uses the term “poets” to refer to all types of artists, writes:

When [political] movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the

poets—no matter the medium—who have succeeded in imagining the colour of the sky, in rendering the kinds of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing. Knowing the colour of the sky is far more important than counting clouds. Or to put it another way, the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling. (11)

Even the most humdrum, reformist political activism involves an imaginative leap, a belief that some aspect of a particular state of affairs can be altered. To the extent that art is both an expression of the imagination and fodder for it, we can say that the imagination is among the key points of intersection between art and politics. Art that in some sense engages utopian thinking is, I argue, an especially pitched enactment of the interplay between art and politics. I say this because of the unmistakably, nakedly political character of utopian art. Paintings, sculptures, films, novels, poems, plays, musical compositions (or other artistic expressions) that present, interrogate, enact or otherwise speak to ideas about how a more perfect society might look and function can be the sounding boards for, inspirations to, or embodiments of political movements.

Utopian thinking is fundamentally an imaginative act and it is for this reason that it so frequently finds its expression in artistic works. It is a dreaming up of the socio-political visions that guide and mobilize people to advocate for a more just world with features that are likely to be dismissed as impossible. But, when it comes to political arrangements, notions of the possible and impossible are ideological constructs that can be fought over, demolished, and re-built in a new form. As Levitas writes:

[I]t is more accurate to say that pragmatism is the dominant form of legitimation in contemporary political culture, rather than that contemporary politics is driven

by pragmatism. What is produced in contemporary political discourse, however, is an anti-utopian utopianism [...] in which the claim to pragmatism serves to repress its utopian character. The consequence of this is the continued possibility of rejecting challenges and alternatives as ‘utopian,’ while placing the ideological/utopian claims of one’s own position beyond scrutiny. (“Looking for Blue” 298)

No political position is innocent of some conception of what the good society is or how it can be realized. Once it is clear that notions of possibility and impossibility function to protect and strengthen entrenched power, what is impossible one day can be made commonsensical the next. This is what I take from the famous situationist phrase scrawled on the walls of the Sorbonne in May 1968, “soyez realistes, demandez l’impossible” (“Be realistic, demand the impossible”). Moreover, often the least “realistic” or “practical” solutions to social or political problems are the best ones: for instance, some opponents of slavery in the United States used to critique abolitionists for being insufficiently pragmatic and would instead agitate for making slavery a more humane institution. For impossibilities to become possible they must first be imagined. Part of the social worth of utopianism is precisely that it generates the unrealistic, impractical, simplistic ideas that, ironically, can provide the most useful, workable ways to solve complex political questions. In this sense utopianism can be said to be valuable for its experimentation, its idea generation, its invention, and its creativity.

Improvised jazz is rife with such exercises in the utopian imagination. Improvised jazz is an art form that, as with utopianism more generally, takes as a central concern the challenging of conventional notions of the possible and the impossible. Fred Wei-han Ho writes that the jazz has always been about “the freedom of time, pitch, and harmony from fixed, regulated,

predictable standards. Every major innovation in the history of the music has been from the struggle of musicians to gain [...] greater levels of expressive freedom through liberating the two basic fundamentals of music: time (meter) and sound (pitch/temperament/harmony)” (285). This music is characterized by a bending and breaking of rules so as to create new realities, by a rupturing of common sense, in much the same way as radical political movements and the utopian thinking to which they are frequently connected. As Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble point out, “musical practices in which improvisation is a defining characteristic *are* social practices, envisionings of possibilities excluded from conventional systems of thought and thus an important locus of resistance to orthodoxies of the imagination (knowing)” (11). These are social, rather than exclusively aesthetic, because the music is itself a form of resistance to traditional cultural power centres that cannot be severed from unequal political configurations. We can see this in that at the same times and places that jazz challenged and re-defined understandings of what is and is not possible in music, various broad-based African American political organizations mobilized to challenge and re-define what was politically and socially possible for them.

Common among all utopian exercises is a foundational belief that social and political orders are not mandated by biological or theological forces. Halpin argues that applications of the utopian imagination “illustrate the principle that no matter how bad things appear they can be envisaged different, and for the better [...] While they do not always provide insight into precisely how things can be made better, utopias usually point up possibilities for change that normally would be either ruled out automatically or never thought about” (35). Accepting that human institutions and relations are malleable underlies and is pre-requisite for any effort to create political change. This is a recurring theme in improvised jazz. As Fischlin and Heble

write, “Improvised music takes the materials of existence—knowing, community, and instruments—and reshapes the possible relations they have with each other. Improvisation is the site at which possibility and potential are made in an exemplary gesture of making. [...It] symbolizes the recognition that alternatives to orthodox practices are available” (11). Improvised music is about making and re-making arrangements among performers, between performers and audiences, and between performers and instruments. Possibility itself is, I argue, among that which is being produced in the process. Here I mean that in the perpetual play of improvised music is simultaneously an embodied demonstration of how a social configuration (the production of music and its consumption) can be contested and revised as well as a lived refutation of the monopoly on possibility that existing socio-political relations claim for themselves.

With possibility comes hope. Or, to make the same point from the opposite angle, without possibility there is no hope, and without hope there is insufficient will to struggle for a better world. Central to utopian activities is the creation of this hope. As Halpin argues:

If we ask where and what kind of place is the place of hope, then one answer might be ‘utopia.’ Although every expression of ultimate hope does not require the exercise of the utopian imagination, all utopias are driven by hope—that is to say, they express the dreams of an age, and they say something about its capacities. Indeed, to the extent that the power of utopian thinking derives from its inherent ability to visualize the future in terms of radically new forms and values, utopianism holds out to optimists of the will the promise of them being able better to reconsider critically their opinions about the most desirable ways in which the economy, society and the state should be organized. (34)

As a discursive, imaginative location, utopia is where the oppressions and inequalities of an epoch are made visible and placed under erasure so that the possibility of liberation and egalitarianism can be written and built in their place or, it might be better to say, efforts in the directions of these can be discussed, created, and fought for and over. Any space in which such debate, visioning, and struggle proliferate will be an incubator of hope because the latter is born of and nurtured by the former.

Improvised jazz is in a similar way a realm of possibility and hope. Ho writes that African American music of the past hundred years, of which improvised jazz is an important component, “is part of an extramusical ethical/spiritual/socio-political revolution—the commitment, attitude, resistance, perseverance, celebration, love and joy opposing oppression, brutality, poverty, persecution, and exclusion. It is the triumph of the human spirit, of spirituality and ethicality in the midst of cannibalistic and corrupting capitalism” (289). The simultaneous revelry and combat in response to violent, racist political structures that Ho describes is exemplary of what it means to have hope despite a viciously unequal society. If oppression and exploitation are enacted in ways designed to degrade, dehumanize, and demoralize, hope itself is a form of resistance. In this sense, the rejuvenation, exuberance and sense of possibilities in utopian art—and I include improvised jazz in this category—are themselves types of struggle against domination.

Improv, Utopia and Production

Proliferations of the imagination and the dissolution of the boundaries between the possible and the impossible do not by themselves necessarily constitute the best of all possible worlds. Neo-Nazis, for example, imagine a world radically different from that which currently exists in the western world in the 21st century and would presumably welcome the opening of

new possibilities for their dreams to be realized. My point is that, to be utopian, a vision must have some particular content that identifies it as such. Discussions of the utopian must ask, what is being imagined? What precisely is the character of these emergent possibilities? For whom are these desirable and why? No easy, universally agreed upon answers to these questions exist, so discussions of utopia will tend to evolve into debates over how the ideal society might look. Questions of how the goods in such a world would be produced and distributed, of how services will be performed and rendered, in short of what property regimes will be in place, will necessarily figure prominently in such discussions. As I have suggested in the introduction to this piece, economic equality, an end to alienating labour, and a heightened degree of communal activity are among the attributes that figure prominently in sketches of utopia.

In multiple ways, improvised jazz offers models of all of these. Firstly, this genre involves utopian modes of production, a point that is made repeatedly in Eddie Prévost's "Discourse of a Dysfunctional Drummer." Reflecting on his experiences as an improviser, Prévost notes that many improvised performances are characterized by

common musical property rights. [...] In musical improvisation, and especially that of the collective kind, it is impossible to apportion a property quota to each player. The only workable criterion is actual physical presence within the musical situation. Musicians and audiences might have their own ways of measuring the respective value of each contribution but this is of no help when it comes to the bureaucracy of music economics. Trust and generosity (if sometimes fragile) become necessary as measures of equity. (359)

Prévost's point suggests that among performers of improvised jazz there is broad recognition that the collective, largely spontaneous nature of this form of musical production is such that it

cannot readily be assimilated into capitalist property relations. Both the labour taking place and the resultant musical goods give life to the dubious criteria by which value is measured in a market capitalist system. Consequently improvised jazz performances have a dual function common to utopian art. They both call into question the methods by which value is computed and the dissemination of wages and profits that follows from this, and as such they demonstrate an alternative model in which property is owned collectively.

Prévost goes on to describe the character of improvised jazz performances in greater detail. He argues that in Western classical music performance “the relations between the musicians are mediated through the score, whereas in collective improvisation the mediation is unpredictably direct, one musician to the other. [...]he performance is not ‘controlled’ by an external agency such as ‘the composition,’ which is a preformed dictate of how a performance should proceed” (359). In this analysis is a description of a utopian mode of production that can often be found in improvised jazz. Prévost’s account is of musical workers undertaking production that is a communal practice of direct democracy. I argue that this embodied counterpoint to capitalist production is utopian not only because it points toward economic equality and takes a collective approach to economic activity but also because these very characteristics subvert the atomization and isolation that causes so much of the alienation characteristic of capitalist society.

Furthermore, Prévost writes that “By definition [improvisation] was less controllable; ideological sacred cows like property relations were brought into question. Who owns the music if most of it is improvised? There is of course only one answer (ethically at least): the musicians” (356). Artists’ efforts to maintain control over that which they produce are important to the history of this music. Efforts to do so have been pursued by, for example, the Association for the

Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). This organization “stresses a composer-improviser orientation and the importance of asserting the agency, identity, and survival of the African American artist” (Lewis 150) and insists that “Black artists must control and be paid for what they produce, as well as own and control the means of distribution” (Abrams and Jackson qtd. in Lewis 151). Musicians are cultural workers and these are contestations over their right to maintain control over the means of musical production. These initiatives, I argue, can be understood as material instances that, however limited and isolated, themselves constitute a utopian project in which workers struggle to own the fruits of their labour while also providing an example of the sort of undertaking that workers in all sectors might undertake in an attempt to build some version of a best of all possible worlds.

But perhaps the most radically utopian concept at work in improvised jazz performances is the glimpse of a post-work society this music at times provides. A “post-work society” is a world in which people are no longer compelled to engage in labour for sustenance—or, at the very least, not for forty-plus hours each week—and accordingly have a greater amount of time to devote to leisure and, notably, to cultural and communal activities. Its core promise is of a two-sided freedom: the freedom from toil and the freedom to have leisure. Discussions of this concept imagine a world wherein people are able to have these freedoms through some or all of the following features on this (non-exhaustive) list: job-sharing arrangements in which people share available and necessary work so as to create full-employment; re-directing automation technologies from their current purpose; maximizing profits for the capitalist class at the expense of labour; the provision of necessary goods and services as a means of reducing the burden on workers to provide these; an overall reduction in consumption with a view toward ecological imperatives; and a concomitant decrease in the amount of productivity that is required. The post-

work society can, therefore, be understood to take integrated approaches to major, inter-related social problems such as unemployment, exploitation and environmental degradation that simultaneously aims to liberate people from alienation and to enable communally and individually enriching cultural practices. For this reason, I argue that the post-work society is a quintessential example of what I describe above as an unrealistic, impractical, simplistic idea that can provide some of the most useful, workable ways to solve multifaceted social problems.

Improvised jazz provides windows to envision and in a sense celebrate this post-work world. This sentiment is at work in, for example, Sun Ra's comments on his composition, "Brainville": "In Brainville, I envision a city whose citizens are all intelligent in mind and action [...] All of the institutions stay open 24 hours per day [...] the places of entertainment never close because people need to be entertained throughout the day" (qtd. in Sites 580). Implicit in Ra's conception of this utopia is that time for recreation is plentiful; hence, the need for centres of culture and amusement to be open permanently. From Ra's description one can also deduce that his vision of a just society is one in which the arts are both created and consumed by large segments of the population, which suggests a broad-based possession among citizens of the surplus leisure time that is required to partake in these practices. Kelley, moreover, points out, "black musician-poets have relentlessly critiqued alienated wage labour. Their utopias are always free of 'work'—meaning low-wage, unfulfilling, backbreaking labour—and full of pleasurable leisure" (164). He writes that radical African American music of the 1960s, which includes improvised jazz, "created a world of pleasure, not just to escape the brutality of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, but to build community, establish fellowship, play and laugh, and plant seeds for a different way of living, a different way of hearing" (11). Here a deepening and fostering of collective bonds is attributed to the imagined departure from capitalist labour

that Kelley associates with this music. In Kelley's account, music that steps away from systems of domination including capitalist production, even if only in a temporary and partial way, facilitates as a direct consequence the joy, satisfaction, and fulfilment associated with leisure activities.

While improvised jazz by no means maps out how this or any other type of utopia can be realized, it does offer imaginative renderings of a better society. Of equal importance is that it performs and embodies such worlds. In so doing improvised jazz stimulates political dreaming, opens reality up to contestation and—if only for fleeting moments—renders the impossible possible.

Some Thoughts on What's Next

My intention is for what I say above to be understood as a rudimentary and very general exploration of some of the points of overlap between utopianism and improvised jazz. The first point I want to make about the research on this topic is that little of it exists. Relevant scholarship tends to fall into one or two of the following categories: analyses of utopia; histories and considerations of improvised jazz; discussions of utopia and its relationship to music in general and sometimes to jazz in particular. My point is that work needs to be done that has a specific focus on utopia and improvised jazz, since the latter clearly has its own characteristics that set it apart from jazz and certainly from music as such. While my remarks here have been primarily of a theoretical nature, I also wish to recommend that future discussions of this topic include writing with a more detailed, materialist analysis. The article by Sites that is on my list of works cited is one notable exception to the two shortcomings I have discussed in this paragraph, and his article is in many ways a model of the type of scholarship that I would like to see proliferate.

By focusing primarily on how this type of music generates utopian hope and re-defines the possible, as well as on some of the ways that improvised jazz hints at post-capitalist economic arrangements, I have paid too little attention to questions of race and gender. I am not alone in producing work with this weakness. Often utopia is discussed in terms that give little or no regard to these issues and adopt a rhetoric that seemingly purports to be colour-blind and genderless and my concern is that in practice this means proffering notions of a just society are functionally patriarchal, heteronormative, and white. There are important exceptions to this and I do not want to over-generalize my critique: for example, several of Ursula K. Le Guin's novels articulate feminist utopias and Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* takes as its subject specifically African American visions of the just society. Nor do I wish to suggest that every category of identity must necessarily imagine utopias that are incompatible with the dreams of people who belong to other social groups, which risks treating these categories as fixed essences. Moreover, it seems to me that part of the project of utopian thinking has to find ways for people with diverse customs and histories to live together justly. Part of what makes improvised jazz such a fertile ground for these types of visionings is precisely its capacity to foster "concepts of alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue" (Fischlin and Heble 2). My point, however, is that while utopias are largely about how different people live together differently, there is a need for greater attention to be paid to these differences and the manifold, at times contradictory, interests, needs and desires that a just society would have to account for as well as to how a broader spectrum of populations have expressed their wishes for a better society.

In closing, here is a short list of some texts that I have not been able to discuss in this piece that I think would be useful in enabling further research on improvised jazz and/as utopia:

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