

Making the Scene: *The Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto*  
by Rob Wallace

*The following essay contextualizes the accompanying documentary, produced by Martin Eckart and Rob Wallace. For more information on AIMToronto, please visit their website: <http://www.aimtoronto.org/index.php>*

Toronto has long been an important location for jazz and other forms of improvised music. Outside of Canada, the famous Massey Hall performance by Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, et. al., is arguably one of the more well-known events in the city's ongoing connections with improvisation.<sup>1</sup> But Torontonians themselves have made the city a crucial nexus of improvisation for many years. With this in mind it seemed appropriate to devote the first ICASP Spotlight to [The Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto \(AIMToronto\)](#).

AIMToronto has played a major role in the life of Toronto's improvised music scene since the organization's founding in 2004. It is many things, including: a not-for-profit organization, with a board of directors, promoting Toronto-based improvised music; a group of those same musicians; a collective of large and small ensembles which play together in various formats throughout the city; and a symbolic manifestation of the improvised music in Toronto that draws on similar organizational models from the past

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes known as "The Great Concert" by "The Quintet", the 1953 Massey Hall performance by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Charles Mingus, and Max Roach has gained legendary status in jazz circles. The concert recording was released by Mingus and Roach's Debut Records in the same year. Thanks to Mark Laver for recently reminding me of the continuing relevance that this concert holds in jazz mythology.

(from Toronto <sup>2</sup> and elsewhere) while at the same time inspiring disparate musicians to see their native city as a space of thriving musical activity, worthy of any other global city known for its improvised music.

While AIMToronto had hosted many out-of-town musical guests as part of their [Interface series](#), September 2007 marked a watershed moment in the group's history, when the AIMToronto Orchestra—an ensemble of musicians drawn from the general membership—was assembled to perform under the direction of Anthony Braxton at the Guelph Jazz Festival. This performance, now available on [compact disc](#), was my initial introduction to AIMToronto. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it also turned out to be the beginning of an ongoing collaboration between myself and various members of AIMToronto, in my role as both a researcher and a performer of improvised music. In the spring of 2009, members of the ICASP team at the University of Guelph developed a plan to feature improvised music collectives on the ICASP website. By this point I had already performed with some of the members of AIMToronto, as well as participating in the University of Guelph's Contemporary Music Ensemble, led by AIMToronto co-founder and board member Joe Sorbara. Martin Eckart, a grad student at UoGuelph and also an active musician in the Southern Ontario scene, suggested that we make a documentary about AIMToronto. Neither Martin nor myself are filmmakers, but we decided that a documentary would be the best medium in which to combine the sonic and visual components of AIMToronto's musical performances and member interviews. The resulting movie is an improvisation and composition of on-and-off-camera interviews

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<sup>2</sup> AIMToronto itself includes many members who are also part of earlier, and still continuing, organizations like the [CCMC](#), [the WoodChopper's Association](#), and others.

with several AIMToronto members along with footage of performances recorded over the course of three nights in May of 2009 at [Somewhere There](#), a performance venue run by trombonist Scott Thomson, located in Toronto's Parkdale neighborhood. The history of the venue is intertwined with the history of AIMToronto, and both stories are told in the documentary.

### *Toronto Now and Then*

Like most creative environments, the city has seen ebbs and flows in the tide of improvised music, but what makes the current moment exciting is the shared sense of optimism about the state of improvised music in Toronto. This view is expressed throughout the documentary by both long-time performers, and players more recent to the scene. Through persistence and devotion to making music in Toronto—which importantly means *living* in or near Toronto—AIMToronto illuminates the rich musical life of the city that exists on the concert stage or street-corner, in small venues, practice rooms, and recording studios, and in musicians' daily interactions with one another and their environment. The subtle changes from one day to the next, which, as veteran improviser John Oswald suggests in the movie, are some of the most interesting facets of improvisation. The change over time, the durability and flexibility of musical relationships, and the dedication to making Toronto a homebase as well as an international touring destination are all encompassed in the AIMToronto story.

Some AIMToronto members are more or less ideologically and aesthetically committed to the category of “free improvisation,” but no one rigidly polices boundaries—especially

in the moment of performance. And while listeners can probably expect certain kinds of music at Somewhere There, for example, within those idioms are a wealth of nuance and genre diversity. Witness the different sets of music on the weekend we filmed: indie rock, free improv, composed “jazz” music, implications of rock, swing, krautrock, modal music, etc.

Another notable feature of the AIMToronto membership is that, like other collectives of diverse creative minds such as Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians ([AACM](#)), many of the performers are also invested in the pedagogical and academic dimensions of improvised music, breaking down the often false distinctions between “doer”, “teacher”, and “thinker” which have so often plagued the history of art. This interchange of identities is particularly important for improvised music, which has seen the detrimental effects of negative criticism in the popular and academic press, sometimes contributing to a general confusion or antipathy towards the music in the eyes and ears of the public at large. Ultimately, as many of the musicians state in the documentary, AIMToronto encourages artists to take control of their own destinies, be it through operating performance spaces, arranging gigs, producing and distributing recordings, or defining their own creative practice before someone else can define or appropriate it for their own ends.

### *Toronto from the Outside In*

As an relative outsider to Toronto—and to Canada, for that matter—until 2007, I was nevertheless welcomed into the AIMToronto community as a performer, and as a

researcher I hope that the film Martin and I have made serves as a testament to the openness and community spirit which AIMToronto fosters among their own membership as well as invited guests. Like any group of free-thinking individuals, no one agrees on everything all of the time, or even part of the time, be it in a musical or socio-political setting. But like good improvisation, the surprising points of convergence and departure make AIMToronto and its musical activities a lively exchange of ideas and emotions that remains relevant. As percussionist Germaine Liu puts it: “Everyone I have encountered so far is always happy to play, to connect, and to help out on many levels . . . it is a healthy community where people are passionate about collaborating and music making.” Thanks to the open-minded and open-eared improvisations of AIMToronto, fans, musicians, academics, and critics have renewed reasons for focusing their attention on the city where “Great Concerts” were once thought to be only the stuff of legend.