

Panel: Justice, Culture, and Improvisation

Chair: Ellen Waterman (School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph)

Abstracts:

Owen Chapman: “Sampling, Remix and Improvisation with Records, or ‘How the Turntable Taught Me to Play the Drum’”

Iyer (2008) proposes a dichotomy between music that is "in time" - or live, improvised and reflexive vis a vis surrounding sounds - versus music that is created "over time", including music composed and transcribed as notation as well as music "programmed" via computer. "In time" music is closer to the phenomenological experience of everyday life--it is responsive, immediate and rhythmic in the same way that our quotidian activities are both affected by and contribute to the sounds of our environment. Drum and bass, scratch DJing and other types of music that flow from DJ culture are described as illuminating hybrids, due to their "over time" cutting and programming of jazz samples and other "in time" sounds. My aim is to turn Iyer's hybridization into a full triangulation; scratch DJing, hip hop and other forms of sample-based music occur "through time"--i.e., via successive improvisations with arrays of sound technology and audio-samples. Sampling starts with listening and being affected by sounds, before the selection, editing and mixing process begins. Listening and then responding through remixing is a form of improvisation. The question: "What is sampling?" will be answered differently by different artists, along with the related question: "Where should one draw the line regarding sampling from copyrighted sources?". Responses will change over one's lifetime, as social norms flex, technologies evolve and one's own practices multiply. Personal negotiations of what is just or legal when creating sample-based music are balanced against a host of other considerations, such as what sounds good. This presentation explores these issues through a description of the evolution of my own practice as a scratch DJ and sample-based producer.

Peter Johnston: “A Call for All Outlaws: Improvising Musicians And The Problems with Social Justice”

While frequently characterized as a collaborative practice that can generate positive social change, musical improvisation is by equal measure a site of conflict, as participants in the improvised music scene compete for the minimal resources available for those working in the cultural field. This paper will explore improvisation as a social practice embedded within specific socioeconomic structures and musical conventions. Particular attention will be paid to the conflicts and activities of musicians from the improvised music scene in London, England who identify with the sound-worlds and social structures that have solidified around the concept of free improvisation. These conflicts take place

both on stage, where musical ideas are developed and tested in public performances, and off stage as musicians negotiate with economically dominant institutions for the capital to continue their creative work. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, free improvisation functions as 'illegitimate culture', as the absence of popular appeal and academic recognition positions it outside of the flow of capital which enables other musical forms to continue. I will explore how these interpersonal and extra-musical tensions, generated out of inequitable official definitions of culture, mediate the capacity of improvised music to live up to the transformational agenda we might wish to ascribe to it.

Salman Rana: "Freestyle in Hip Hop Culture"

The freestyle in Hip Hop culture is an improvisational method and discipline employed by practitioners of the Hip Hop elements: breaking dancing, turntablism, graffiti writing and emceeing (arguably the most popular element today). The freestyle discipline requires the practitioner to harness the various energies of the moment in order to produce a spontaneous and consistent expression fresh enough to meet the requisite Hip Hop tests. Most often than not, the freestyler hones his or her skills through battles. Battles, at their core, are adversarial and competitive. Individual, group, neighbourhood and even regional reputations often rest on the shoulders of the battler. The battle is thus more than artistic expression. In the sink or swim hyper-innovative and spontaneous world of Hip Hop culture, the freestyle battle takes the form of a normative tool of sorts, used to resolve conflicts, set boundaries and transform roles and identities within the subculture, while altering positions of power and recognition. This paper intends to analyze improvisation as an adversarial and norm setting discipline in Hip Hop, through the freestyle aesthetic. The analysis will reveal one way in which marginalized young people in a particular sub-culture determine lower order rules when governing themselves within the self-imposed boundaries designed to enhance their collective sub-cultural identity as Hip Hop heads. In this regard, improvisation as method becomes a principle means for young people to organize and define themselves against external demands and assumptions.