

**Improvisation in a Community Centre:
Performance, Activism, and Research with the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band**

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The Carnegie Community Centre, which opened in Vancouver in 1980, is at the centre of it all in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). In fact, it is often referred to as the “living room of the DTES”. All services are free and the Centre maintains an open-door policy for an annual membership of one dollar. Its mission is “to nurture mind, body, and spirit in a safe and welcoming environment. Through the leadership and participation of our volunteers, we provide social, educational, cultural and recreational activities for the benefit of the people of the Downtown Eastside.” (Uto) One of these activities is an opportunity to participate in the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band.

As a graduate student in Music Education at the University of British Columbia, and a research assistant for the ICASP project, I am designing a research project in applied ethnomusicology to explore the artistic, social, and political dynamics of the Carnegie Jazz Band. Applied ethnomusicology is a field that sees academic work as a form of activism: not just “studying about,” but “doing something to help”. For me, playing in the band has been a rewarding activity – it is also a necessary first step to designing an ethical and useful research program. I have learned that the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band uses jazz and improvisation to bring budding and experienced musicians together in a creative and affirming social environment. One of the keys is the band’s emphasis on social processes rather than a cultural product. In this short essay I describe my experience with the band and connect my research aspirations with my work as "Education, Outreach, and Community Programs Coordinator" for Coastal Jazz (the organization that produces the TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival, and, along with the Carnegie Centre, an ICASP partner). You can see my interview with the band’s director Brad Muirhead on the Improvisation Tool Kit at www.improvcommunity.ca.

The Downtown Eastside is the poorest neighbourhood in all of Vancouver and it has a very diverse population. It stands on un-ceded Coast-Salish Land just blocks away from the ocean, and though its boundaries are defined differently depending on who you talk to, it is

flanked on one side by Gastown (a trendy, over-priced area) and on the other by Strathcona (one of the oldest areas of Vancouver), and to the South, by China town. It seems that the DTES is being threatened by gentrification on all sides. Among the residents of the DTES are: new immigrants, retired/injured resource workers, artists, Chinese and First Nations people whose families have populated the area for years, people released/kicked out of the closing mental health facilities, social workers, those with a mind towards community development, and sex workers. It also has the highest proportion of men to women in the city.

History is visible on the murals of the many buildings in the DTES, a long story of grass-roots activism. DERA (Downtown Eastside Residents Association) is an organization that has fought tirelessly for tenants' rights and to keep affordable and safe housing a priority in the DTES. Insight is a safe-injection site just down the street from the Carnegie. There are always bottle collectors heading west down Hastings to the bottle depot, and other folks selling their wares on the streets.

When I jump off my bus at Main and Hastings and cross the street to the Carnegie I often notice the warning arrows and messages painted in yellow on the road to remind pedestrians to take care (as this corner is one of the most dangerous in the country for pedestrian deaths—being hit by cars). Once at the corner where the Carnegie stands I often walk through the crowd of folks buying and selling all kinds of drugs, but I never get hassled and once up the steps and inside the Carnegie I am often greeted by a smile from the security guard and one of the elderly men whom I see every week playing a complicated version of checkers that I don't yet know how to play.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Local activist and artist Savannah Walling writes that the character of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) is overwhelmingly and unfairly portrayed in the media as volatile and negative. She explains her view as a resident of the DTES, saying that the neighbourhood's "character has immigrants and young families. It's a working and retirement home for resource workers. It's a haven for middle class professionals who value sustainability over growth. It's a sanctuary for artists and the marginalized" (20). In addition, Walling addresses the well-publicized presence

of drugs and prostitution in the DTES: “The area’s history of bootlegging, drug dealing, and prostitution stems from a combination of poverty, self-reliance, and its treatment as a dumping ground for the city’s problems” (20). She links the drug scene to “the city’s lack of recovery and mental health services, a widening gap between rich and poor, and increasing homelessness [which mean] that our area attracts users of both prescription and illegal drugs” (20) In fact, the DTES has been characterized as a slum or skid row since the 1950’s when “city planners declared this area a slum, despite evidence to the contrary” (20).

Walling argues that, “[w]ith an average of 12 year’s residency, its population is one of the most stable in the city. Residents stick together, work together and depend on each other in hard times” (20). Clearly, media portrayals of the DTES do not tell the whole story. The artistic vibrancy and the prolific creation of artistic work in the DTES demonstrate other, more positive and complicated understandings of this neighbourhood. Walling quotes Patrick Foley, a participant in the Shadows Project (a theatre project in the DTES): “Here we have the Downtown Eastside, a skid-road [sic] neighborhood if there ever was one... And yet, if given an opportunity, the people here can create interesting, moving, and mesmerizing work” (Walling, “We’re All in this Together” 22).

The Carnegie Centre Jazz Band: Profile and Activities

In December 2009 I contacted Brad Muirhead, facilitator/teacher of the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band and at his invitation I attended one of their rehearsals. At the end of this rehearsal I was introduced to the band and was asked by some members if I am a musician and what I play. To my answer of “yes, the violin,” they exclaimed “well we don’t have one of those—you going to join?” I was taken aback by this enthusiastic invitation and I joined the band in January 2010. I have attended all of their rehearsals since then, every Friday from 11am-2:30pm, in order to get to know the members and to gain a better understanding of how the band is run (i.e. what goes on in rehearsals). I’ve been documenting my experiences and reflecting on them in a journal to aid in my research on the band. Following is an excerpt from my journal:

A Personal Reflection on Playing in the Carnegie Jazz Band

I am a master's student in Music Education at UBC and also the Education, Outreach, and Community Programs Co-ordinator for Coastal Jazz. It is with these two hats that I have been introduced to Brad Muirhead, the leader of the band, but it is because of a personal motivation that I have joined the band. I went to check out the band in December of 2009. I arrived midway through the rehearsal and listened. Something about the group made me feel good—it made me want to play with them. For me, music is about community, it is about building relationships and a sense of togetherness, it is something to do with other people—it is not “just about the music” for me.

I find it interesting to watch how Brad teaches, how the band members negotiate the music, their understandings of it, the personal dynamics, and their instruments. It is a pleasure to play music that up until this time I had no real training in. I am a classically trained violinist who began improvising when I joined the Contemporary Music Ensemble at the University of Guelph at the beginning of my undergraduate degree in 2001. I have also dabbled in fiddle music—a passion that is ever growing. But jazz (the kind read from charts) confounded me—and I didn't particularly love it—but something about the feeling in the band made me want to play, and because it was jazz I am learning another new idiom. It is a challenge, and I am also really starting to enjoy a wider variety of jazz (especially Thelonius Monk)!

I am being musically challenged and personally challenged in trying to unravel my thoughts around the “good feeling” that I have when I participate in the band—what creates this good feeling? What about it compels me to continue to play with them? How do the other members of the band feel about playing/being in the band?

I have found myself unsure as to how to approach the band with my “official hats” on—the grad student and employee of Coastal Jazz rather than just “me” as

a fellow musician. I have found it awkward mixing the three but I am committed to research and work that is participative and engaged and bringing my personal self into the mix feels authentic and necessary in approaching my research and in building a partnership between the Carnegie and Coastal. I want to enter into these things with the band, as part of the band.

The first half of rehearsals is about an hour and a half of basics of music and jazz theory. We play scales, rhythms, talk about form and the basics of music: that it is made up of pitch and rhythm and that pitch is organized in two ways: melody and chords (harmony), horizontally and vertically. We also talk about form and soloing and how it is important to be able to communicate using the musical language to talk with other musicians. There are usually only three to five of us who attend: a sax player, a trombone player, myself and sometimes a singer and a pianist. The sax and trombone players have been in the band since the beginning and had never played any instrument or had any formal musical training before joining. They are still learning the mechanics of their instruments and the basics of music theory; they can read music but rely on writing the note names on their charts so that they can read quickly enough to play with the rest of the band. This means knowing what intervals are, being able to recognize them and name them, knowing what chords are, what major/minor scales are, and knowing what the circle of 4ths is.

Then the rest of the band arrives around 12:30pm – usually one at a time and they set up their chairs, amps (from a locked room within the room), guitars, drums (from a locked storage closet in the space), music stands, and once everyone is set up we sometimes take a break or we just start—usually with easier songs—usually a blues tune and then gradually we do more challenging songs later in the rehearsal where not everyone plays. The people who come to the jazz theory part don't play on some of these. They listen or take a break and grab a coffee from the cafeteria or go out for a cigarette on the enclosed Carnegie balcony. Everyone gets a chance to improvise a solo at some point in the rehearsal—the more advanced players take more solos and Brad has the rest of us sing the tonics of the chords along so that we internalize the harmonic structure of the pieces.

As people arrive we sometimes have to get up to let them in because the door automatically locks—security is tight in the Carnegie—everything is locked up after the instruments have been handed out. Sometimes people come in to listen but most of the time they stand outside of the door listening, sometimes dancing along, and sometimes waving at members of the band that they know.

I feel like I am participating in an incredibly supportive, open and generous environment and I'm learning new ways of thinking about music/scales/harmony and teaching.

The arts community in the Downtown Eastside is very active, vibrant and diverse (www.heartofthecityfestival.com). Artists within the community are often active and involved in a variety of different projects at any given time and many of the participants in the Jazz Band also perform as members of other groups and in theatre productions. Rika Uto, Carnegie Centre Arts and Education Programmer, states that “the main purpose of the Centre’s arts programming is to offer accessible, beginning-level programs for low-income residents to engage, inspire and encourage community and skills building opportunities” (2). Musicians participating in the Jazz Band either bring their own instruments or borrow instruments from the Carnegie Centre for rehearsals and performances. Security is a concern given the Carnegie’s limited resources for replacing instruments. As part of the Carnegie Centre’s policies, instruments borrowed must stay in the Carnegie Centre. This policy is designed to ensure that instruments “don’t grow legs and walk away.” Though perhaps necessary, the policy proves challenging for musicians who wish to practice outside of formal rehearsals. In addition, there is no space in the Carnegie Centre for individual practice: space is at a premium at the city-run community centre. These challenges are prohibitive to the development of individuals’ musical skills and self-expression and also add challenges to teaching a community music program in the DTES.

The Carnegie Centre’s mandate requires that the Jazz Band be open and accessible and this means that attendance to Jazz Band rehearsal is spotty; they usually have a core membership of approximately four people who attend regularly (though since December 2009

this number has grown to about 10 people). These challenges make it hard to prepare repertoire for performances. The band currently meets once a week for two to three hours, where we focus on basic music theory and also on playing jazz pieces selected by facilitator and teacher, Brad Muirhead. Instrument repair is another prohibitive issue facing the Jazz Band. All of the instruments owned and housed at the Carnegie Centre are in need of repair and in addition some of these instruments are locked up in a variety of different offices and accessible only when loaned out by members of the Carnegie Centre Staff. Many of these problems stem from shortages of space and funding. As mentioned above, space is at a premium at the Carnegie Centre because so much goes on there. Many programs are housed at the Carnegie and building practice rooms, fixing instruments, and designing safe storage all require funds that the Jazz Band currently does not have.

There is a huge diversity in levels of musicianship in the band. This is a positive thing because more advanced members motivate less advanced players and help them out - playing with people who are better than you can really help along your playing! But, this is also a challenge: it's a very hard situation to teach in (challenges include making the music interesting for players of all ability levels and nurturing an inclusive space). This situation can also be frustrating for more advanced players because sometimes they'd like to "really dig in". These challenges are heightened in performance situations because Muirhead wants to showcase everyone and so not everyone plays on all songs. This is okay, but runs the risk of seeming exclusive. Also, in preparing for performances it is important to have a pretty consistent band configuration and this has the potential to close the door to folks who just want to (or can only) drop in now and then.

Since January, I have often met informally with Brad Muirhead to talk about the band and about his role as leader of the band. I was curious about his interest in teaching at the Carnegie, about what he teaches and why, and also about some of the concerns he has regarding the program and some challenges he would like to see addressed. I have also met with Rika Uto to talk about developing a partnership between Coastal Jazz and the Carnegie Centre, specifically with the Jazz Band. We talked about the challenges Coastal might be able to help to address and how best to approach doing research at the Carnegie. Some of the issues

that came up in this conversation were: providing accessible music education that is both challenging and nurturing for participants at all levels, instrument acquisition and maintenance, the need for new music stands, the need for a better and easier technical set-up in the band's rehearsal space, access to educational performance opportunities, and the possibility of having visiting musicians do workshops with the band in order to enhance their educational experience. In addition to these things, Muirhead has mentioned that he would like to have one space to keep all of the Jazz Band music, instruments, and gear together both to make it easier to keep track of and to access equipment.

When I mentioned the possibility of doing a research project with the band, Rika Uto said that I'd need to present the program committee with a two-page proposal that would state my involvement with the Band, my intent in doing research, my research approach, and what the direct benefits to the band and the larger community would be. She also mentioned that the fact that I'm playing in the band will make a difference in the committee's appraisal of the proposal – she mentioned that my direct involvement as a participant in the band will be looked upon favourably in a community where researchers all too often fly in, grab what they want, and leave.

I am fortunate to be working in the Coastal Jazz office once or twice a week; it has proved fortunate and beneficial for the Carnegie Jazz Band project! My presence in the office has allowed me to chat with people about the band, and as a result, my co-workers have suggested some interesting and exciting directions to explore. Once a co-worker who also chairs the Moberly Committee (Moberly is a community centre in South East Vancouver and about 1/2hr by bus from the DTES), suggested that I invite the band to the Moberly University/College Big Band Jazz Festival. We coordinated the donation of complimentary tickets and I attended the show with a couple of other band members. It was a great experience! This is an event and a partnership that I'd like to foster and establish as an annual educational excursion for members of the Carnegie Jazz Band. This opportunity sparked a conversation with another Coastal Jazz staffer, about initiating a free concert-going program for members of the Jazz Band to attend concerts organized and presented by Coastal Jazz as part of

their jazz education. This project is still in its development stage; I think that it has a lot of promise and is an incredible educational opportunity.

In April 2010, another member of the Coastal Jazz team sent an interesting contact my way. Through her, I was introduced to two staff members of Shore 104.3 FM with whom I met shortly afterward. Through an instrument drive during the Winter Holidays, Shore 104.3 FM had collected instrument donations. I told them about the band and the lack of quality instruments available to people who'd like to participate and they were interested in donating these instruments to the Carnegie Centre. I approached Rika Uto about this and passed on their information to her and have since heard that Shore 104.3 FM has donated a number of instruments to the Carnegie. I intend to keep the staff at Shore 104.3 FM up to date about the exciting things that the Carnegie Jazz Band is doing in the hope of somehow being involved in their next instrument drive.

In addition, and with the help of staff at Coastal Jazz, I coordinated a performance by the Carnegie Jazz Band at the 2010 TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival in Gastown. This was an exciting gig for the band – and we worked very hard to put together a kick-ass set to let the wider community know what we're up to! In appreciation of the Band's participation in the Jazz Festival, each musician received a festival pass (a benefit which all musicians receive as part of their artist packages). The performance was an overwhelming success, with all band members reporting to have felt confident, excited and proud of the performance; indeed, there were also a number of folks from the DTES who attended the show. Next year, suggested one band member, we should raise the visibility of the Carnegie by wearing Carnegie t-shirts and having a banner with the Carnegie's name on it. My hope is to get the band on one of the Gastown stages for next year's festival.

Emerging Research: Improvisation in Community Music Programs

My work as a research assistant for the Improvisation Community and Social Practice Project (ICASP) is to develop a research project that documents the Carnegie Centre community jazz workshops run by Brad Muirhead. As mentioned above, ICASP develops projects in collaboration with its community partners, such as the Carnegie Centre and Coastal Jazz . My

research will be a step toward testing ICASP claims that participation in the improvisational arts can bring connectivity, self-awareness, creative thinking, and transformation to populations in need, and it will shed light on conceptions and issues of identity as expressed by members of the Carnegie Jazz Band. I will be documenting best practices for implementing improvisational arts-based activities in social and educational programs for aggrieved, marginalized, and at-risk communities that could also contribute to the formation of arts policy and hopefully secure more funding for the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band.

As part of this project and in partnership with ICASP researcher Julie Smith, members of the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band, and Brad Muirhead, I will examine, through ethnographic methods including participant-observation and interviews (with members of the band, Brad Muirhead, and Rika Uto), the benefits that music making, specifically creative improvisation, provides for members of the DTES, how they see themselves as music-makers within this program and the larger paradigm of community music, and the challenges that they face in participating and teaching in this open and accessible community music program. Reflexive Ethnography (Davies), Applied Ethnomusicology (Sheehy ; Titon ; Araújo, et. al; Reyes; Loughran; Pettan) and Community Music (Elliott 1995, 1997; Myers; Mullen; Veblen 2002, 2005, 2008; Coffman; Dillon; McCarthy; Phelan; Silverman) propose some interesting philosophical approaches and practical strategies for engaging responsibly in this kind of work.

Outcomes

The outcomes for this project are in part as yet unknown. However, they will include a paper examining the benefits and challenges of teaching, facilitating and participating in community music (jazz) programs in inner cities (specifically, the DTES). The outcomes will be informed by the research: that is, by what is identified by participants and by the ICASP project as being of utmost importance to the continued existence and development of the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band.

Sheehy proposes that applied ethnomusicology is any application of music scholarship beyond research for research's sake. His is a typical definition of applied ethnomusicology. Music is approached as a tool to accomplish political and social goals, to address issues of oppression and

omission, and to empower communities that partake in research. Sheehy suggests tools and strategies to accomplish these activist goals:

(1) developing new “frames” for musical performance, (2) “feeding back” musical models to the communities that created them, (3) providing community members access to strategic models and conservation techniques, and (4) developing broad, structural solutions to broad problems. (330-1)

These possibilities of addressing issues of oppression and omission through the work of applied ethnomusicology provide a useful frame in thinking about outcomes for the proposed project with the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band. Currently, the band only performs at the Carnegie Centre and at the DTES Heart of the City Festival, all within the DTES and largely for members of the DTES community. Developing new performance frames would be beneficial to the project and to the Carnegie Jazz Band as it would raise awareness in the larger Vancouver community about the vibrant arts community of the DTES and possibly about the long history of jazz in the DTES. Jazz Street Vancouver, a project developed and implemented by Coastal Jazz, is an interactive website that documents the long and varied history of jazz in Vancouver (www.jazzstreetvancouver.ca). I think that it would be valuable to the proposed project to link the history of jazz in Vancouver, and specifically in the DTES, to the work of the Carnegie Jazz Centre. This could provoke some very interesting discussions and debates about the history, identity, and values of the DTES community.

In regards to documentation and feeding back, I can foresee that a possible outcome of this project could be a CD or radio show produced by the Carnegie Centre Jazz Band and ICASP that demonstrates the kind of music that they create and the uniqueness of their community. As mentioned above, there are some structural challenges to running and participating in the Jazz Band. Instruments are in constant need of repair, individual practice space is needed, and with that, greater access to instruments. To address these issues funding is needed to ensure the continued and sustainable existence of the band. I hope that my proposed research will be of some help in securing funding to address these issues.

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