

## **Roundtable: Crisis in New Music? Vanishing Venues and the Future of Experimentalism in New York City**

**Tamar Barzel, John Brackett and Marc Ribot**

### ***Bios***

*Tamar Barzel* is assistant professor of Ethnomusicology at Wellesley College. Her scholarly interests center in jazz/improvisational music, Jewish cultural studies, and New York City's downtown music scene. Her research focuses on how musicians negotiate issues of identity – cultural, national, creative, and personal – through their work. She has presented her research at national and international conferences, including the Society for Ethnomusicology, the Society for American Music, and the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University. Her article, "If Not Klezmer, Then What? Jewish Music and Modalities on New York City's 'Downtown' Music Scene," was published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Winter 2002). She is working on a book manuscript, '*Radical Jewish Culture: Composer/Improvisers on New York City's 1990s Downtown Scene*'.

*John Brackett* is an assistant professor of Music at the University of Utah where he teaches and co-ordinates the music theory curriculum. Prof. Brackett has presented and published on the music of John Zorn, Led Zeppelin, and Arnold Schoenberg. His book – *Tradition/Transgression: Critical and Analytical Essays on John Zorn's Musical Poetics* is forthcoming from Indiana University Press.

*Marc Ribot* is a composer/guitarist based in New York City

### ***Abstracts***

Barzel: "Experimental Music: How Does the Centre Hold?"

Brackett: "Change Has Come?: Chronicling the 'Crisis' on New York's Lower East Side"

Ribot: "Crisis in Indie/New Music Clubs: The rare feeding of a musical margin"

Numerous clubs, venues, and other less formal performance spaces have supported and sustained many of the creative musicians who have called New York City their home. In some ways, many of these venues (The Blue Note, CBGB's, The Knitting Factory) are just as recognizable and celebrated as the musicians themselves and the music they created. With the closing of Tonic on the Lower East Side (henceforth LES) in April of this year, many musicians lost an invaluable venue in Manhattan. Billing itself as a "home for avant-garde, creative, and experimental music" since 1998, Tonic closed its doors due to the rising costs associated with operating in an area that even many longtime residents can no longer afford.

A grassroots protest opposing Tonic's closure included a rally in front of City Hall and a demonstration at Tonic that ended with the arrest of two of the most vocal opponents of the club's closure: guitarist/composer Marc Ribot and musician/activist Rebecca Moore. Concerning the changes taking place on the

LES, Ribot has been the most outspoken musician, speaking not only at the City Hall rally but also authoring an early-warning piece entitled “Crisis in Indie/New Music Clubs.” In his article, Ribot pleads for the “care and feeding of a musical margin” by describing how musical styles that developed and flourished in New York would have been impossible without the support and opportunities made possible by local venues, venues forced to close under the oppressive weight of gentrification. Ultimately, Ribot argues, the marketplace has failed creative musicians and venues. To counteract this trend, he urges musicians to fight for subsidized spaces by appealing to practices in Europe, especially the so-called “cultural exception” arguments.

Ribot’s arguments are compelling and deserve to be taken seriously. At the same time, however, certain assumptions implicit in Ribot’s article as well as opinions expressed by others angered by the closing of Tonic require critical examination. In my talk today, I will examine those arguments that invoke gentrification when referring to Tonic’s closure and similar changes taking place on the LES. While I certainly believe that the financial interests of developers and owners are to blame, the history of gentrification in the Lower East Side is a complex one. Therefore, I will compare the current plight of club owners and musicians to the burgeoning arts scene in the LES in the early 1980s. After outlining certain qualitative differences between the LES in the 1980s and today, I will consider the possibility that musicians and artists – through the marketing of a marginal, resistant musical community to a global market – may ultimately be complicit in the current wave of gentrification overtaking the area. So as to not end on a pessimistic note, I will conclude by proposing alternative marketplace strategies not considered by Ribot, strategies that would allow musicians to participate in the marketplace without appealing to “cultural exception” and/or government-subsidized performance spaces.