

Oral Histories

by Paul Watkins

The Oral Histories of Improvising Artists—by way of personal account— provides insight into the histories of improvising artists and communities that participate in, value, and engage with political, cultural, and ethical dialogue in action, often beyond a strict university setting. Oral speech, like improvisation, implies a process rather than a single monolithic product: such dialogism disrupts clear distinctions between standard and non-standard approaches to music and improvisation, as well as orality and text. For example, Nathaniel Mackey argues in *Discrepant Engagement* that “[t]he rush to canonize orality as a radical departure from the values of an ‘eye-oriented’ civilization runs the risk of obscuring the attention paid by recent poets to the way the poem appears on the page” (122). Mackey’s notion of an oral ‘graphicity’ highlights that oral histories provide an important addition, though not necessarily a counter-perspective, to articles, essays, and graphic scores that rely more heavily on textuality, many of which are found in the ICASP database. Further, a simple distinction between the oral and the written is sometimes difficult to ascertain, as demonstrated by the many improvising musicians who have included verbal/textual elements in their performances. These include Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake, among many others. The blurriness of generic boundaries is particularly evident when artists engage in cross-disciplinary collaborations. Examples of such works include Pierre Hébert and Bob Ostertag’s project *Between Science and Garbage*, which incorporates the artists’ work in the visual and the digitally oral, respectively, and Langston Hughes and Charles Mingus’ joint album, *Weary Blues*, blending Hughes’ poetic and Mingus’ music.

Traditionally, Western philosophy is quick to define history as something that is catalogued and written, with little emphasis on the changeability of facts or the interaction and influence of the present on the past. In fact, improvisation, while not belonging to any single culture, can be saliently read in relation to many First Nations concepts of time as a fluid process enacted in perpetual negotiation. According to Okanagan and First Nations interpretations, history is a “fluid motion, bound by neither time nor space” (Karl Hele, “The Whirlwind of History” 149); under this assessment, it makes perfect sense that the telling of history should not be confined to a single story etched in stone, nor to a single mode of storytelling (written or oral). This Aboriginal concept of understanding the past, present and future involves a direct engagement of all three, even though they come “before and after one another as the whirlwind spins history” (Hele 149). While it is important to acknowledge the

cultural specificity of any conceptual framework, the notion of the whirlwind of history provides one possible methodology, among a matrix, to read jazz music as a fluid process that is always negotiating a past, present, and future, working towards the type of manifesto that Ornette Coleman defines musically as *The Shape of Jazz to Come*.

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Hele, Karl. "The Whirlwind of History: Parallel Nineteenth-Century Perspectives on 'Are they Savage?'" Eds. Ute Lischke and David T. McNab. *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005. 149-188. Print.

Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.