

## Improvisation and Leapfrogging

### The History of Improvisation in Toronto and the *Episteme* of the Twentieth Century

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“I am inclined toward leaping forward” – Mao Zedong, 2 February 1959

“One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind” – Neil Armstrong, 20 July 1969

Here is one way to tell the history of improvised music in Toronto: it was founded in the late 1950s by a non-cohesive group of a few “old timers” who shifted their musical interests from Dixieland and Swing to free-improvisation and were influenced by, without appropriating, the Bebop movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. These traditional jazz figures eventually joined with a group of artists who—also influenced by Bebop and free jazz—adopted free improvisation as a matter of technical necessity. Out of this merger would come two standbys of the classical period of Toronto improvised music: the Artist’s Jazz Band and the CCMC. A key feature of this narrative is the idea that the founders of improvised music in Toronto bypassed the (apparently) linear trajectory of jazz history, skipping over Bebop and moving straight from traditional jazz into free improvisation. This narrative speaks to an *episteme* of the twentieth century; it reproduces a structure of thought particular to that century, and this coincidence is the subject of the present exploration.

What matters here is how a century conceives history and how it identifies historical actors. It could be said that the nineteenth century was absorbed with the notion of progress through historical stages. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* makes explicit the notion that history *is* movement and associates non-movement with historical stagnation.<sup>1</sup> And there is no question that this conception of history was absorbed by Marx. I agree with Alain Badiou that Lenin “is the political thinker who opens the century,” one who announces revolutionary “victory” as the constitutive political agency from 1917 to 1990 (Badiou). We can confirm this thesis via another route, by examining how Lenin conceived of this new political agency historically; this point becomes decisive: twentieth-century thinking did not discard the notion of historical stages, but theorized the properly historical act as one of leaping over them.

The concrete form of revolutionary victory in the twentieth century was the Third International, which made explicit attempts to theorize its identity as a historical actor. In an address made to the newly formed International in April of 1919, Lenin proposes the “leap” as the constitutive element of the organization’s mission—to disseminate the Bolshevik form of struggle worldwide—and its internal condition of antagonism:

Is it surprising that the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat has brought out primarily the “contradiction” between the backwardness of Russia and her “leap” over bourgeois democracy? It would have been surprising had

<sup>1</sup> Hegel asserted this in part through a negation of Africa and African history. Hannah Black provides a thought-provoking exploration of this deliberate omission: <http://www.blackout.lt/citybuiltatnight.html>.

history granted us the establishment of a new form of democracy without a number of contradictions. (Lenin)

It is easy to see how this conception of “victory” as a historical condition would appeal to anti-colonial struggles: national liberation movements were now given a theoretical tool through which to understand how the educational mission that colonialism had devised as an ideological mechanism to justify its operations could be wholeheartedly abandoned. The victory of national liberation struggles after the Second World War transformed the “leap” into the Great Leap Forward and a new theorization of independent development at the 1955 Bandung Conference created a new historical actor in the Non-Aligned Movement, which appropriated the “leap” and coincided with the development of a new discipline, International Development Studies. The revolutionary party transformed itself into the nation largely without comment as the terminology of class struggle was silently replaced with that of national development.

The self-consciousness through which participants in the history of improvised music in Toronto construct that history enters into this thought structure from a different door. A glance at the archives of *Coda Magazine* in January 1959 provides some insight into the artistic-intellectual subjectivity from which improvisation would emerge, a subjectivity rooted in traditional jazz and agnostic to Bebop (“modern jazz”):

Contrary to popular belief (built up by uninformed articles in mass appeal journals) jazz is going through a very bad period. [...] We do not give coverage to Modern jazz and many people ask us why this is so. We are not opposed to modern jazz and quite enjoy listening to it. However, the field of modern jazz is adequately covered in such periodicals as *Down Beat* [etc., ...] We are interested in the “oldtimers” who have still so much wonderful music to give if they have the opportunity. (Editorial)

Such a perspective is confirmed in contemporary interviews. John Oswald, in recounting the early history of improvisation in Toronto, centred on traditional jazz players such as Freddie Stone, Larry Dubin, and Michael Snow. It is worth quoting at length:

I think it was about 1958 or 1960 Freddie Stone on either coronet or trumpet, and Larry Dubin decided to cut a record where they didn't make any decisions about what they were going to record before recording it. Perhaps never released but they did do the session with that intent. And that predates a lot—it predates free improvised things. Things like Ornette's Double Quartet thing, John Coltrane's *Ascension*—these things all still had some kind of a head. [...] Another interesting thing about Mike and Larry was that they both came from Dixieland backgrounds. [...] It's an interesting list of passing through jazz musicians that Mike played with. But they did a lot of Dixieland and yes, there's a lot of collective improvising in the Dixieland tradition. So it's interesting how they leapfrog from what is often thought of as the ‘moldy fig’ thing over Bebop, very supportive and interested in playing Bebop but that traditional Dixieland thing leapfrogging into the sixties thing. (Oswald)

The “leapfrogging” from Dixieland to free-improvisation mirrors the leap from absolutism to proletarian democracy in Leninist theory, and the trajectory of non-aligned independent development. Through the instance of the “leap” we can catch a glimpse of an *episteme* of the twentieth century, uniting a proletarian vanguard with an artistic avant-garde by framing their conditions of possibility.

How do we frame those conditions now, and how can we situate the continuing history of improvisation within them? Certainly since the 1990s we have seen a sea change both in the composition of the improvised music scene in Toronto and the notion of the motive force of history in the contemporary world. Conceptions of development and historical action framed in stages have given way to a more—to borrow a metaphor—polyphonic understanding epitomized by sub-national distinctions like the “space of flows” and “space of places” in the work of Manuel Castells, or, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described it, the increasing interpenetration of the First World and the Third. Music has entered a period in which innovation can occur within any number of historical forms, and key elements of what consists of the avant-garde today, namely Internet art, often nostalgically, recalls a former period, the age of “classic internet”—the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In the sphere of production, we have entered the most paradoxical of situations: as automation and globalization has made industry increasingly distant from the lived reality of Western culture, a growing movement has turned to antique, “artisanal” forms of production.

From here, we are left to consider how the history of improvised music in Toronto compares to that of other localities. Certainly the experience cannot be general. In Montreal, for instance, the Quatuor de Jazz Libre de Québec had a specifically anti-colonialist, Marxist-Leninist character. Whether or not a similar “leap” occurred, consciously or self-consciously, remains a matter for investigation. We certainly can draw some preliminary coordinates for a more in-depth investigation into how improvised music in Toronto was of a piece with the intellectual *a priori* of its time. While this connection may exist, we must certainly admit that the expression of this *a priori* in art was substantially more benign than its expression in politics, a century of “victory” that left incalculable violence, suffering, and death as material remainders.

*For Gregory Fenton*

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<sup>2</sup> This style is especially true of the artists centred upon the Newhive collective ([newhive.com](http://newhive.com)).

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