

Listening at the Edges:
Aural Experience and Affect in a New York Jazz Scene

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In jazz circles, someone with “big ears” is an expert listener, one who hears the complexity and nuance of jazz music. Listening, then, figures prominently in the imaginations of jazz musicians and aficionados. While jazz scholarship has acknowledged the discourse on listening within various jazz cultures, to date the actual listening practices of jazz musicians and listeners remain under-theorized. This dissertation investigates listening and aural experience in a New York City community devoted to avant-garde jazz. I situate this community within the local history of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, discuss the effects of changing neighborhood politics on music performance venues, and analyze social interactions in this scene, to give an exposition of “listening to music” as a practice deeply tied into other aspects of my interlocutors’ lives. I engage with cultural anthropology, urban sociology, and media studies, applying insights from those fields while engaging perennial concerns and topics of jazz scholarship: the nature of musical improvisation, and relatedly, the dynamics of listening and aural perception, as well as the complex, changing, but continuing relationship between African American cultural practices and jazz.

This project makes several contributions to the ethnomusicology of listening and to jazz studies. First, I argue for and demonstrate an ethnographically-informed mode of music analysis: I use ethnographic data on participants’ aural experience as the basis for fine-grained sound analysis. Second, in attending to the processes that produce

alternative, parallel, and sometimes intersecting canons, I locate the work of canon formation in the everyday lives of listeners and reveal its political and ideological implications. Finally, building on the previous two arguments, I propose that listening, though often experienced as subjective and private, takes place in networks of social relationships that listeners constitute both through real-time interaction and through engagements with history. Although scene participants vary widely in their theories of how to listen, it is through interactions around shared aural experiences that they carry on the ethos of the 1960s countercultural and Civil Rights movements and reproduce their investments in the ideas of social and musical marginality in the post-Fordist New York of the early 21st century.

In memory of MARC WILLIAM SOMOROFF

and the many hours of listening we shared

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I know I am forgetting someone – forgive me.

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Introduction

16 February 2010

Steve Dalachinsky and Yuko Otomo sit in my small apartment in West Harlem on a gray, snowy afternoon in 2010. As we have many times before, we are talking about listening, and as in the past, our conversation ranges widely, continually departing from talk about musical sound only to return to music several minutes later. I have decided that for this listening session, I want to play tracks off my iPod (which I've hooked up to my stereo) in a somewhat random fashion. I use this format because I am interested to see and hear how Steve and Yuko talk about music on the fly, in real time. As I role-play as their personal DJ, Steve settles into the role of a more active commentator. Yuko, on the other hand, speaks less frequently, choosing her words and making holistic observations about the musicians we hear, jazz history, and the aesthetics of the current-day avant-jazz scene. We speak casually and colloquially; at this point I have been hanging out with Yuko and Steve for about a year.

I cue up a track on my iPod and play it. A pianist and vibraphonist begin in counterpoint. The vibes player unfolds a segmented, bop-like melody while the pianist volleys with clipped, chordal figures full of tritones. Acoustically, the instruments sound clear and separated in lateral space, courtesy of stereo recording technology. This last feature means the music was almost certainly recorded after 1957.¹ As the music unfolds during these opening moments, the two parts reveal themselves to be in separate scalar or

¹ The U.S. recording industry began to release stereophonic recordings in 1957 (Mumma et al. n.d.).

modal fields, giving rise to a polytonality that ventures beyond typical 1950s post-bop practices. The vibes then drop out, leaving the pianist alone to reiterate the off-kilter figures. After a couple more iterations of the short, syncopated piano figures, a bass enters, maintaining the medium-tempo 4/4 groove that the pitched percussion set up. The vibes and piano come back in for another duet, while the bass rests for a few measures. The bassist re-enters with a steady walking line. A moment later, with a *smash-BANG* on snare and crash cymbal, the drummer lays into the 4/4 meter. Now the quartet is grooving together. The vibes and piano continue to trade phrases. The vibraphonist maintains bop-like phrasing, swinging his or her eighth notes and rolling off smooth 8th-note triplets in the style of Milt Jackson. The pianist, however, seems to be onto another tack, reaching for extremes of register, and hitting little clumps of keys. The plausible comparison would be with Thelonious Monk – that percussive touch, those punchy clusters – but this pianist uses more dissonance and repeats little riffs with a jittery feel unlike Monk’s typically behind-the-beat placement. Behind this ambiguous contrapuntal texture (is the vibes player taking a solo, are the vibes and piano playing a duet, or are those designations moot in this case?), the bassist and drummer sound content to sit in the pocket of the mid-tempo groove. The recording has been playing for about a minute and a half, during which Steve has been talking in brief snippets, wrapping up a lingering digression. He pauses and listens for a few moments.

Steve: This sounds like Cecil Taylor’s *Looking Ahead*...but I was gonna say whether it is or it isn’t, the bass player is getting on my nerves [laughing].

Matthew: Why is he getting on your nerves?

S: He’s comping too much, “dum dum dum dum” [mimes the thump of a walking bass line]

M: You would want it a little freer?

S: Yeah.

M: How 'bout the drummer?

S: Wasn't the drummer Denis Charles on this?

M: I think so.

S: Yeah but I never paid attention that much to the rhythm section, basically to Cecil and this obscure vibes player. Although when you first put it on I said, "ooh, I don't like the sound this vibes player's making." But then I immediately realized what album it was, which I'm surprised I did, but I think I realized it more from Cecil's comping in the background! [laughs]

M: That's good, man.

S: It's one of my favorite albums.

This was not a particularly heightened moment of listening for us, nor was it an especially intense or memorable moment among the countless moments I collected during fieldwork. But this moment of conversation is illustrative and indicative of several key themes of this dissertation. First, it points to the shared body of knowledge that undergirds the ease with which Steve and I go back and forth. As dedicated jazz listeners, we have each spent countless hours listening to and looking at sound recordings, reading journalism and criticism, and, in our different ways, hanging around and getting to know jazz musicians. Second, it displays a style of talk, and of talking about what one hears in music, that we have both learned *socially*, that is, through interactions with other listeners (including musicians). Steve's decision to take a guess at the specific recording he hears is shaped by decades of social interaction and talk about jazz. Jazz practitioners and listeners reproduce this communicative style, this "jazz talk," at varying levels of skill and in different registers of music-analytic focus. In the ongoing praxis of reproducing and circulating "jazz talk," listeners continually work upon their interpretations of jazz history, debate the artistic merits of specific musicians, share news about hearing an unfamiliar but intriguing musician.

Among dedicated listeners, jazz mediates social interactions. By this I mean that talk about aesthetic preferences regarding jazz musicians and recordings also functions as talk about, or, just as often, *around* individuals' subject positions in relation to one another, to whatever jazz scenes in which they participate, and in relation to broader social formations, such as identities inflected by race, gender identities, class position, and affiliations with specific places and social histories. Social talk about music can also mediate in the sense that it becomes the ground upon which social interaction rests. Steve Dalachinsky referenced an example of this phenomenon when, with characteristic wit and candor, he compared some of his friendships with fellow jazz listeners to the relationships of alcoholics who only socialize while drinking or *through* drinking.²

The kind of talk Steve and I engaged in, crucially relying upon discographical knowledge, is not *unique* to jazz audiences and listeners. Connoisseurs of other music genres and traditions could similarly display the depth and breadth of their discographical knowledge and the precision of their aural skills. Nor is our focus on individual musicians, and moreover, on their musical personas, unique to jazz cultures.³ But the conversational practices Steve and I engaged in bear a self-reflexive edge that demonstrates the *currency* of the practice and notion of "listening" within jazz cultures and scenes. Part of what it means to be "into jazz" (whether or not one plays jazz) is the recognition that one should develop the aural skills that enable the listener to identify

² The connotations with addiction were also relevant in Steve's analogy (see Chapter 4).

³ For instance, I have witnessed, both in person and on Internet forums, professional and amateur electric guitarists and fans of electric guitar speak and write about the sonic details about different guitarist's characteristic sounds: they might discuss the ways in which Carlos Santana's "tone" of 1969 and 1970 sounds completely different from his tone of 1977. Porcello (2005) discusses a similar practice of verbalizing the perception of nuances of timbre among sound engineers recording drum kits.

specific musicians' styles and be familiar with canonical recordings. I can vividly recall a moment in a summer jazz workshop I attended during my late teens, in which veteran saxophonist Patience Higgins instructed students to always be listening. "You should be buying at least one new CD a week. I have over one thousand CDs in my collection," Higgins said. I had not heard of Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), but once I became familiar with the book I recalled Higgins' suggestions as living proof of Berliner's thesis that listening to recordings forms a fundamental part of a jazz musician's pedagogy and sense of self.

Moreover, listening skills form part of the cultural identity of jazz musicians; Berliner writes that "the jazz tradition generally elevates aural musical knowledge, with its associated powers of apprehension and recall, to the paramount position" (Berliner 1994:93). Berliner gives other examples of the currency of listening in jazz cultures: bandleaders often choose musicians for their *listening* abilities as much as for their technical skill (399); certain regular audience members may develop personal relationships with musicians and achieve recognition as "serious listeners" (456). Ingrid Monson (1996) continually returns to the topic of listening in her study of group interaction with the jazz rhythm section, corroborating Berliner's observations about the value jazz musicians place on listening abilities and the prevalence of "listening" as a discursive topic in jazz cultures and scenes. Gabriel Solis' work on the continuing presence and importance of Thelonious Monk's music within late-20th and early-21st century jazz cultures highlights the constant oscillation, enabled by a large commercially-available archive of sound recordings, between listening and performing in jazz

practitioners' work (Solis 2008). The reflexivity with which participants in jazz practice listening, constantly thinking about their aural skills and assessing those of other participants, also manifests in the title of a recent anthology, *Big Ears*. In the Introduction, the editors write: "In jazz circles, if someone says you have 'big ears,' you have to feel good about that. 'Big ears' is high praise. Players and listeners (and jazz players are listeners) with 'big ears' are equipped to hear and engage complexity as it happens" (Rustin and Tucker 2008:1).

The journalistic literature on jazz abounds with mention of listening and the valuation of finely honed aural skills. I cite only two particularly visible instances: 1. *The Jazz Ear* (Ratliff 2008), which contains a collection of interviews with big-name jazz musicians focused upon recordings that have been particularly meaningful to them, and 2. Leonard Feather's famous (within jazz circles) "blindfold tests" published in *Downbeat*, in which Feather plays jazz recordings for a prominent jazz musician to elicit evaluative remarks.⁴ During these "tests," the musician was expected to make educated guesses about whom he was listening to (e.g., whether the pianist he hears is Bud Powell or Sonny Clark). The act of evaluating and "naming that player" demonstrates both the musician's highly-developed aural skills and an awareness of his colleagues and their styles.⁵ *Downbeat* eventually copyrighted the name "Blindfold Test" and continues to publish the column to this day. Moreover, the "Blindfold Test" was both shaped by earlier practices of

⁴ I presume that Ratliff was partially inspired by Feather's model, though his interviews differ in that the musicians choose recordings that they wish to listen to and discuss.

⁵ I use masculine pronouns because, in the case of Feather's "Blindfold Tests," the majority of the interviewees, as well as the musicians on the recordings, were men. For a sampling of "Blindfold Tests" with Miles Davis, see (Alkyer, Enright, and Koransky 2007).

jazz talk and in turn became so commonly known among jazz listeners that it circulates as a trope in the imaginations of jazz listeners.⁶ Later in the listening session, Steve playfully referenced the “Blindfold Test” paradigm.

S: Oh, I’m doing pretty good so far.

M: You *are*—

S: —I’m usually terrible at these.

Steve, Yuko, and I were all aware that our listening session resembled the “Blindfold Test.” Steve’s joke about “doing pretty good” acknowledged the trope of the “Blindfold Test” while also expressing a measure of sincere anxiety. It was a joke that still pointed to the truth that his reputation as a listener still was at stake. This mild anxiety, despite my reminders that I didn’t care if he knew *who* was playing, is merely one small piece of evidence of how that kind of aural acuity – the ability to hear fine gradations in style (e.g., a given musician’s preferred “licks,” harmonic substitutions, and crucially, characteristic instrumental or vocal timbre) and trace them to specific musicians – holds value for jazz listeners.

Names and Labels: Genre Definition, Racial Politics, and Questions of Field Site

Building upon work that complicates idea of “the jazz community,” I conceive of “jazz” the musical genre as instantiated in numerous cultures and scenes. I think of jazz “cultures” as being fluid and not determined by geographic location, whereas I use the

⁶ An example of existing jazz talk influencing the form of the “Blindfold Test” are the informal listening sessions of jazz musicians. Participants will gather in a domestic space, listening to recordings, and engage in verbal analysis and debate about exciting musical passages, the aesthetic success of a recording, etc. Berliner discusses listening sessions as pedagogical tools (in addition to their function as social events) throughout *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), but Chapters 2-4 include particularly relevant observations.

term “scene” to refer to a network of jazz musicians and listeners whose activities take place in a specific location. Therefore, throughout this dissertation I refer to the Lower East Side (LES) avant-jazz *scene* when discussing the individuals with whom I conducted fieldwork. It could be said that the LES scene is one among many in current-day avant-garde jazz *culture*.⁷

The majority of ethnographic work on jazz in the United States has taken place in New York City.⁸ There are reasons for this trend: the city is home to dozens of venues that schedule jazz acts; many jazz musicians from around the U.S. and other countries migrate to New York for the increased performances opportunities the city promises; numerous record labels, both independent and major label affiliates, specializing in jazz are based in New York. Beginning in the 1930s, New York gradually came to eclipse New Orleans, Chicago, and other cities in the U.S. cultural imaginary as the center of the jazz world. As a result of this folkloric status, scholars have often naturalized New York as place in jazz studies, resulting in a prevalent assumption that to do ethnographic *or* historical research on jazz in the U.S. means doing it in New York City.⁹

⁷ For recent work that complicates the often reductive and simplified use of the phrase “the jazz community” in much existing jazz scholarship, see Prouty (2012) and Moehn (2013).

⁸ Scholarship on jazz practiced *beyond* the U.S. seems to consider questions of place more consistently (see, for example Atkins 2001; Feld 2012a; Heffley 2005; Kater 1992; Lomanno 2012; McKay 2005; Muller and Benjamin 2011; Starr 1983).

⁹ Notable exceptions include Brothers (2006), Bryant (1998), Currie (2009), Greenland (2007), Isoardi (2006), Lewis (2008), Looker (2004), and Tucker (2000). However, most of these studies are largely characterized by their attention to jazz activity in specific locales *other than* New York. Bryant and Isoardi write about jazz “in Los Angeles;” Lewis provides a history of the AACM that celebrates its inception and development in Chicago; Looker attends to the specificity of the Black Artists' Group's location in St. Louis. These cities figure as prominent “characters” within the studies, whereas jazz scholarship that focuses on phenomena situated within New York seem to feel far less obligation to discuss the specificity of place and the ways local political economies impinge on jazz scenes. Even so, Patrick Burke's (2008) close attention to

Paul Berliner (1994), Ingrid Monson (1996), and Travis Jackson (2012) have documented and analyzed the practices of “mainstream” jazz musicians working in New York from roughly the late 1970s to the 1990s. These ethnographies broke important new ground in the field of jazz studies by privileging the music-cultural knowledge of jazz musicians, whose voices had long been treated in an instrumental fashion by jazz scholarship and criticism. Collectively, these works identify relevant performance venues, New York-area radio stations, overlapping networks of musicians, and report on overlapping aspects of the financial challenges New York jazz musicians must negotiate by virtue of their profession.

Of these three, Jackson provides the most extended critical examination of place, or “space and spatiality” as he terms it, in the life of jazz scenes and the various musical and discursive practices that constitute them. Jackson provides a thorough review of both the concept of “music scene” as it has been defined in popular music studies and the history of political-economic factors that helped determine the possibilities (and impossibilities) jazz musicians faced in practicing their art *and* making ends meet.¹⁰ Though Jackson often refers to “jazz scenes,” implying the plurality of experiences among jazz practitioners in the New York area, he slips back into using the singular “jazz scene”

the financial and cultural economy of the highly localized 52nd Street jazz scene in New York represents an important exception.

¹⁰ In his groundbreaking historical work on the emergence of bebop, Scott DeVeaux examines the ways that the political economy of the US music industry influenced several key stylistic decisions made by bebop innovators such as Billy Eckstine, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker (DeVeaux 1999). Faulkner and Becker (2009) provide a complement to DeVeaux with their study of the musical and social skills “ordinary” jazz performers deploy in their everyday lives as professional musicians. They reveal the ways that aesthetics and economics intermingle in jazz musicians’ negotiations of one another’s musical skills and references to a shared repertory of compositions.

toward the end of his review (68-69), with the result that his discussion of the material conditions of jazz practitioners in New York lacks the specificity and experiential detail that ethnography can provide.

It would seem obviously reductive to conceive of New York City as a monolithic metropolis whose eight million-plus inhabitants share the same experiences. Providing a discussion of "the lives of New York jazz musicians" and the "status of jazz in New York" implies a homogeneous quality that is similarly limited. To aggregate the multiple positions of jazz musicians whose experiences are differentiated by musical practices, levels of renown, age, ethnicity, gender, and economic circumstances into a composite formulation of "what it's like to be a jazz musician in New York" is to gloss over the specifics of musicians' lives, and hence of their music.

In this dissertation, I extend the tradition of New York-based jazz ethnography by bringing a critical examination the political economy and history of a specific neighborhood to bear on my interpretive analysis of the aural experience and listening practices of participants in a jazz scene centered in that neighborhood. While the present work admittedly reiterates a U.S.-centricity that has long characterized jazz studies, I show that even in the city that many fans think of as "the center of jazz," listeners construct and thematize place as a meaningful component of experience and as a force that acts upon music aesthetics, while still thinking of jazz as a global musical genre. I am concerned with exposing the importance of *place* (social-geographic) in individual and social processes of interpreting aural experience, specifically with regard to listening to jazz. To inform my analysis of listening as an *emplaced* practice, I draw upon scholars

whose ethnographic work has considered the significance of place in the formation and experience of aesthetics (Berger 1999; Feld 1996; Fox 2004; Gray 2013; Novak 2013; Piekut 2011; Samuels 2004).

Depending upon whom you ask, the portion of Manhattan south of 14th Street and East of Broadway is located either on "the Lower East Side," "Loisaida," in "Alphabet City" or at the tip of the "East Village." The name one chooses indicates something about that speaker's sense of her subject position with regard to class, ethnicity, and political affiliation and affinity.¹¹ For the majority of the 20th century, the neighborhood was home to people confined to the margins of New York's political economy. Within the larger geographical context of the southeastern bulge of Manhattan, which also includes Chinatown and the lowest portion of the Lower East Side, it is an area that has long been home to ethnic enclaves – Germans, Dutch, Irish, Italians around the turn of the 20th century; Jews and East Europeans later. The mid-20th century saw an influx of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. If you hear someone refer to the intersection of 2nd Avenue and 5th Street as being "on the Lower East Side," the chances are that this person has deliberately chosen to avoid the name "East Village," because the latter connotes the real estate developers who have sought to re-brand the neighborhood since the early

¹¹ For various explanations of the different names given to the southeastern area of Manhattan lying below 14th Street, see (Abu-Lughod 1994; Mele 2000; Patterson, Flood, and Moore 2007). While Christopher Mele's work appears in both Abu-Lughod (1994) and Patterson, et al. (2007), his monograph (Mele 2000) provides the most systematic explanation of how the multiple place-names ("Lower East Side," "Loisaida," "Alphabet City," "East Village") label overlapping areas of land in the southeastern corner of Manhattan, and index different sociopolitical affiliations and agendas.

1980s, and the processes of gentrification they helped to set in motion.¹² Scene members' participation in and/or awareness of the neighborhood's social history informs the ways they hear avant-jazz. The aesthetic ideal of "roughness" comes to index a specific place and its history. The *rough edges* found in the timbral, textural, and processual characteristics of avant-jazz achieve iconicity, referring to the *rough* conditions in which many LES residents have lived their lives.¹³

The music I have been referring to as "avant-jazz" has variously been labeled "avant-jazz," "avant-garde jazz," "creative music," "creative improvised music," "free jazz," "Great Black Music," "the New Thing," "out jazz," or just "*this* music." The contestations around the naming and/or labeling of both the neighborhood and the musical style(s) respectively point to histories of contestation and struggle involving differing positions with regard to economic class, aesthetics, ethnic and cultural affiliation, and differing accounts of "history" itself.

Among the names I list above, "Great Black Music," "the New Thing," and "this

¹² Mele is characteristically trenchant on this point: "What constitutes the East Village 'brand' is a stylized and depoliticized subversion borrowed from past and present images, symbols, and rhetorics of protest, resistance, and experimentation" (2000: 287). Elsewhere he sketches out the ambiguity that has emerged around neighborhood boundaries during the past two decades: "In the late 1990s, the symbolic boundaries of the East Village have dipped below its Houston Street border, as renovated apartments, new bars, and trendy nightclubs proliferate in the narrow streets of the old Lower East Side" (x, ff.). Finally, Mele describes the historical relationship between the working-class and multi-ethnic past of the Lower East Side/East Village and its increasingly affluent present (and future): "The stylization of local cultural differences is symbolically representative of its place of origin – but just barely. Such images of the East Village as exotic and interesting, when circulated globally or expressed in a Broadway theater, are distanced from the collective process of invention or the political and economic realities of where they were spawned. Poverty, crime, and despair, as such, do not sell clothes, makeup, music, or housing, but sanitized and playful symbolic references to them can and do" (292).

¹³ See below for more on this point; one of my primary goals in Chapter 1 is the exposition of the argument that listeners hear place and local history in the avant-jazz practiced by the musicians in and around the LES scene.

music” call particular attention to the complex ways that practices of genrefication entangle with questions of race and of the ownership of an expressive form. Members of the Associate for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) adopted the slogan “Great Black Music” in part to evade the music industry’s practices of pigeonholing music into specific genres or categories. Implicit within the slogan was the idea that distinctions between “jazz,” “blues,” “soul,” and other genre names were false, that all of these musical styles were part of a broader, holistic continuum of African American music. The AACM members who used the term “Great Black Music” also staked a deliberate claim of racially based ownership that was very much in keeping with the currents of Black cultural nationalism that held sway during the 1960s.¹⁴ The writings of Black Nationalist critics such as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Larry Neal, and A.B. Spellman helped “The New Thing” to gain currency as a genre name. These writers explicitly claimed the musical experiments of the 1960s jazz avant-garde as African American (Anderson 2007: 93-122).¹⁵ Their employment of the phrase “the New Thing” implied a music-historical context for the genre or movement they were naming, a relationship to one or more “older things” that helped to define what was “new” about this musical movement. “This music,” a term I heard often during fieldwork, pushes even further in the direction of ambiguous and context-dependent semantics, to the point of begging the question of genre naming. The designation only makes sense when used among speakers who already

¹⁴ George Lewis (2008, *passim*) provides an account of the AACM and certain members’ deployment of the “Great Black Music” slogan that complicates the notion that the phrase represents AACM’s overarching agenda.

¹⁵ Baraka also employed the similar slogan “New Black Music” to describe the experimental music of the 60s jazz avant-garde (see Baraka 1967).

know *which* music is being referenced.¹⁶ “Great Black Music” makes an overt claim to racial heritage and ownership of musical style, while the terms “the New Thing” and “this music” implicate a population of cognoscenti. All three labels have been used to invoke a distinction between cultural “insiders” and “outsiders” that, at several key points since the 1960s, has been drawn along lines of racial difference.

While racial politics do not lie at the center of this project’s inquiry, I keep an ethnographic eye and ear on race throughout the dissertation. The vast majority of audience members whom I observed in and around the LES avant-jazz scene were white, while a significant portion of the musicians (roughly one half) I observed were black. Part of my task in this dissertation is to illustrate how race as discourse and as lived experience informs the listening practices I document and analyze. Precisely because of the ways that scene members recognize, talk about, or remain silent on questions of racial politics within jazz cultures and within local (New York) and broader (U.S.) histories, the LES scene provides fertile ground for studying how tropes of “black music” continue to circulate within and inflect jazz practices at multiple levels. I often identify the ethnicity of the people who populate my ethnographic descriptions. I do so both to reflect the awareness of race that scene members evinced, and to give the reader a sense of the demographic make-up of a music scene whose investment in a musical genre is complexly, ambiguously, but deeply tied into an appreciation of its emergence from a particular histories of race.

¹⁶ Similarly, see Anderson (2007: 2, ff.) for a discussion of the semantic ambiguity and various implications of the formulation “our music,” which Ornette Coleman used in the title of his now-canonical recording, *This Is Our Music*.

In some of the earliest monographs on the jazz avant-garde, Ekkehard Jost (1975) and Valerie Wilmer (1977) note the extreme stylistic diversity *within* the musical tradition that emerged from the experiments of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and others. Later scholarly studies of the jazz avant-garde further explicate the various names applied to the musical style(s). David Such provides an overview of various labels, observing that the choice of name speaks to the aesthetic concerns and political positions of the person doing the labeling (Such 1993). In his ethnographic study of New York avant-garde jazz activity during the 1990s and early 2000s, Scott Currie builds upon Such's consideration of the politics of labeling experimental strains of jazz: "The very naming of the musical genre under consideration as avant-garde jazz brings to the fore issues of race and cultural power that require unpacking before any systematic inquiry into meaning can begin" (2009:11). Later, he notes that "[m]any musicians on New York's Lower East Side, especially William Parker, prefer 'creative music' – a locution whose association with Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Music collective George Lewis has traced back to 8 May 1965 as a *terminus ante quem* - while most Europeans favor 'improvised music'" (20-21). Currie settles on the label "avant-garde jazz" or "the jazz avant-garde," presumably because of his observation that this is the label that prevails in scholarly and critical writing.

In this dissertation, I use "avant-jazz" as a default label for this set of diverse styles of jazz-oriented, improvisational music. Arts for Art, Inc. (AFA), the organization that produces the Vision Festival, and that multiple scene members identify as the primary institution responsible for organizing and producing performances in the avant-garde

jazz tradition, refers to “avant-jazz” on its website.¹⁷ Although the Vision Festival is not synonymous with current-day experimental jazz in New York City, most of my research participants explicitly or implicitly acknowledged AFA as a centralizing, consolidating force within the LES scene. AFA produced the RUCMA (Rise Up Creative Music and Arts) music series; attending installments of this series, listening and hanging out with the other regular attendees and musicians, was my single most consistent form of participant-observation. An interlocutor who is a performing musician referred to the Vision Fest as, “let’s face it, the only game in town.” While this dissertation is not an ethnographic study of AFA, the organization functions as a key hub for and an agent shaping the expressive and discursive practices of the LES scene. It seems only fitting to use AFA’s preferred term. In addition, I use “avant-jazz” as a default term so as to delineate the early 21st-century music-making I witnessed from the emergence and efflorescence of “avant-garde jazz” during the 1960s.¹⁸

Roughness and Rough Edges

When you play the trumpet, you are essentially pushing a large tube of metal into your face, amplifying the pressurized vibration of your lips, turning that buzz into music. Some players strive to hide this, making the instrument sound as smooth and consistent as possible. Others, from Bubber Miley to Lee Morgan to Don Cherry, relish this

¹⁷ For the use of the genre name “avant-jazz,” see <http://artsforart.org/about/mission>.

¹⁸ Proof of the Vision Festival’s position as an iconic representation of the jazz avant-garde tradition can be found in one of the most recent and extensive college-level textbooks on jazz history (see DeVaux and Giddins 2009). After a historical survey that begins in the late 1950s, the chapter devoted to “avant-garde jazz” ends with a section on the Vision Festival (445-484).

For a discussion (and problematization) of AFA’s institutional primacy within the LES scene, see (Ribot 2013). I observed other scene participants use the label “avant-jazz” verbally and in print, including a critic who expressed frustration with the AFA agenda similar to Ribot’s account. For a laudatory account of AFA’s institutional role in the LES scene, see Bynum (2014), discussed below, and Currie (2009; 2011).

physicality, exposing the blood and sweat and spit that goes into the instrument, embracing the raw humanity captured in brass. The great Roy Campbell, Jr., who passed away this week, was definitely of the latter group.

...He would swing the horn onto his face with a wide-elbowed sweep, playing ragged lines broken by fast trills and flutters, jumping across the registers with a punchy attack. His music could be lyrical, but it was never clean; the grit of realness was always mixed in.

...at his core he was a true New Yorker, representing a particularly rugged and independent streak of African-American improvisational music that has stubbornly survived in the city despite gentrification and changing trends. Drawing from the ecstatic spiritualism of Albert Ayler and John Coltrane in the nineteen-sixties, which developed in Lower East Side lofts and alternative-art spaces in the nineteen-seventies, Campbell was committed to a kind of free-improvisational music that prized passionate individualism over faceless technique, and advocated for a shared sense of community over the fickle rewards of the music industry.

For the past eighteen years, this form of music has been celebrated annually in New York at the Vision Festival, run by Arts for Art, a nonprofit organization founded by the bassist William Parker and the dancer Patricia Nicholson, two of Campbell's longtime friends and collaborators. Campbell was a guiding force behind the scenes and a fixture at its concerts.

(excerpted from Bynum 2014)

A few days after the unexpected death of jazz trumpet veteran and LES avant-jazz scene fixture Roy Campbell in January 2014, Taylor Ho Bynum, also a trumpeter and participant in the LES scene, wrote a remembrance of Campbell for *The New Yorker* Blogs. In paying tribute to Campbell, Bynum's piece also consolidates the ethos of the LES avant-jazz scene. Bynum places Campbell within a social geography, calling him a "true New Yorker." He quickly sketches out the musical lineage that musicians in LES scene understand themselves to be carrying on. He draws attention to the Vision Festival as the standard-bearing event showcasing this continuing musical tradition each year.

Folded into Bynum's quick sketch of the LES scene lies a pithy explanation of the centrality of *roughness* or *rough edges* as an aesthetic ideal within the scene, and a crucial manifestation of its ethos. Bynum uses synonymic and similar words like "raw," "ragged"

and praises Campbell's sound for possessing "the grit of realness."

During a conversation at his home, professional trombonist and scene stalwart Steve Swell played me a recording by violinist Leroy Jenkins that he had been listening to and admiring lately. Swell praised Jenkins for playing with an "*old* sound." When I asked him to tell me more, he replied, "there's some little rough edge around the outside of it" (see Chapter 5). On another occasion, scene member Brad Farberman and I sat listening to a recording produced by composer and bassist Charles Mingus. Of Mingus' playing, Brad remarked: "His shit's pretty sloppy, but lemme tell you, that is an *integral part* of fucking *music*, is *dirty*. *Sloppiness*. To me that is *so* important . . . when your shit's too clean . . . when your shit is too clean, it's *so* horrible. It makes it unlistenable, to some extent."

Within the LES avant-jazz scene, *roughness* is a virtue. The twin metaphors of "roughness" and "rough edges" appear throughout the following chapters and manifest themselves across the senses. "Rough edges" operate in a manner similar to the way "lift-up-over sounding" operates within Kaluli social life as a "sonic model...that also reverberates and echoes through other Kaluli expressive and interactional modes" (Feld 1994). "Roughness" can be produced and experienced through the sonic, the visual, the haptic: a sound, an image, fabric can all bear "rough edges."

"Rough" connotes the quality of being incomplete or preliminary, in the sense of a "rough draft" or "rough sketch." Situations can be "rough": difficult, even traumatic, as when "the going gets rough" or one is having a "rough week." It's hard to be in a rough spot, but one may feel a deep sense of accomplishment and pride in the ability to "rough it." Musicians who lived in squats (buildings abandoned by their landlords) on the Lower

East Side during the late 1970s and early 1980s in part decided to “rough it.” Stories about saxophonist and LES scene figurehead Charles Gayle’s period of voluntary homelessness have achieved the status of myth or allegory within the scene: scene members circulate this historical knowledge and deploy it as proof of the sincerity of Gayle’s commitment to music and the depth of his sense of artistic integrity. Scene member Steve Holtje showed me an unpublished poem he’d written about Gayle (Holtje 1993). The pervasive motif of the poem is the line, “The greatest living saxophonist,” which begins each stanza. Using irony as its main rhetorical device, the poem describes Gayle’s ascetic living conditions:

...He has one bare lightbulb hooked up and hangs it
over the back of a chair.

The greatest living saxophonist has
a bed and two chairs, one of them
occupied by the lightbulb.

The label of “roughness” describes specific timbral qualities in music: the growls and shrieks of the overtone-rich tenor saxophone sounds of Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders, the crackles and squeaks that form part of trumpeter Bill Dixon’s style, a bassist’s decision to let the strings audibly buzz against the instrument’s fretboard. Roughness can describe rhythmic style: a drummer can create a sense of rough edges by playing patterns that bob and weave around a rhythmic meter. Roughness can also describe an approach to ensemble playing, for instance, Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry playing a melody in unison, while slipping very slightly out of tune and out of sync with each other.

Musicians such as William Parker, Sabir Mateen and others often perform wearing brightly multi-colored garments made of fabrics with fuzzy, bumpy, or irregular

textures. Theirs is not the jazz of custom-tailored suits made of smooth worsted wool. Visual artist and LES scene fixture Jeff Schlanger paints while attending live performances of avant-jazz and considers his visual art both an interaction with and an appreciation of the music he hears.¹⁹ The paintings in Schlanger's decades-long and ongoing musicWitness® Project exhibit canvases of bright colors, dense overlapping layers of brush- and finger-strokes, splatters reminiscent of mid-20th century Abstract Expressionism. The process resembles fresco painting, only in Schlanger's case he is keeping pace with continuously emergent musical sound rather than drying plaster. Schlanger deliberately pursues a working method that reflects his sense of the creative process of avant-jazz performance and also yields a result that calls attention to the materiality of his visual art. He eschews the clean lines of traditional, representational portraiture. Instead, paint, charcoal, and pastels overlap, realist depictions of people mix with expressionistic splatters and gestures of bright color. His works look busy, loose, full of kinesis, and bear a few rough edges of their own.

"Roughness" and "rough edges" obtain in the social life of the LES scene beyond aesthetic media such as music, paintings, and textiles. Americans from other parts of the U.S. sometimes find New Yorkers' speaking style fast, aggressive, blunt. Linguist Deborah Tannen has called this a "high-involvement" style of conversation, by which she means that strategies like overlapping speech (e.g., "interruptions" and finishing an interlocutor's sentence), fast-paced speech, and shifts to personal conversation topics are

¹⁹ I discuss my interactions with Schlanger and provide analysis of his linguistic discourse in Chapter 3. For a general profile on Schlanger, see (Donohue-Greene 2008).

intended to show involvement with what the interlocutor is saying (Tannen 2005). Like many scene participants, I am a native of the New York metropolitan area; many of my informal (unrecorded) conversations, as well as some of my recorded interviews, with scene members often involved overlapping speech, quick topic shifts, many instances of bluntly *getting to the point*, and other markers of the “high-involvement style” of conversation. In the same way that “rough edges” sound pleasing to Swell and other scene members, the ostensible roughness of high-involvement conversational style *feels* natural (and therefore good or pleasing) to people who have learned to speak and converse in that manner.

Due in part to the scene’s situation on the margins of the global music industry and general political economy of New York City, live performances of avant-jazz often take place in venues that connote roughness through a mix of socioeconomic marginality and deliberate aesthetic choices about presentation and design: small, messy dive bars; under-funded, not-for-profit cultural centers; bare-bones performance spaces; and historically, lofts and squats (see Chapter 2 for detailed analyses of the “roughness” of LES scene venues).

Scene participants may live their everyday lives under rugged or rough circumstances (see Chapter 4). Similar to other musician scene members, saxophonist/composer Patrick Brennan works several “day” jobs while diligently continuing his musical activities and playing gigs whenever he gets the opportunity. Some listeners on the scene willingly travel for hours to hear avant-jazz (and other musical) performances, sacrificing time they could use to rest or sleep. Though their life-world

bears resemblance to black cultural nationalism, Afro-centrism, beat culture, the hippie movement, and other social formations that cultivate a generally countercultural sensibility, the LES scene both constellates tenets of those movements and exceeds them. To apply labels of “post-“ would be to ignore the experiential realities of scene members, who perform and hear 21st-century avant-jazz as continuous with the various idioms of jazz and improvisational music that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰

The experience of roughness *across* media and senses (rough musical timbre, tactile rough edges, roughness in social interaction, rough material conditions) allows this trope of rough edges to encapsulate culture-specific concepts of authenticity and marginality, as well as culturally-situated narratives of history and futurity. The “roughness” of avant-jazz derives from older timbral ideals in African American music such as the buzzing of the slide guitar, the diddley-bow; the growls, screams, and shouts of blues, gospel, and soul singers (e.g., Charley Patton, Bessie Smith, Howlin’ Wolf, Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin); the growl of a trumpet played with a plunger mute; the honk of rhythm and blues saxophonists, to compile a very partial list.

More broadly, this “roughness” has roots in some of the multisensory expressive ideals of African American culture that Zora Neale Hurston identifies in her half-satirical, half-ethnographic essay, “The Characteristics of Negro Expression” (Hurston 1998). I’m thinking specifically of the characteristics she labels “angularity” and “asymmetry.”

Within black music scholarship, heterophony, the sound of many people singing a phrase

²⁰ See Heller (2011) and Currie (2011) on the historical continuity of experimental jazz practices from the 1960s to the present day. Significantly, the phrase “The Revolution Never Ended” appears in the title of Currie’s article.

together though not quite in sync, has been identified as a distinctly (though not exclusively) *black* musical aesthetic.²¹ Bynum's *New Yorker Blogs* post situates the sonic "roughness" of Campbell's characteristic sound within a specific musical tradition, and identifies that tradition as African American. By invoking the names John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, Bynum implicitly reaffirms the prevalent rubric of understanding avant-garde jazz as both a factor determining and a reflection of the broader social upheavals of the 1960s created by the concomitance of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements, and other revolutionary and countercultural movements of the era.²² This is how hearing "roughness" as a sonic attribute *also* becomes hearing (and remembering or imagining) historical moments, certain structures of feeling, or a *Zeitgeist*.²³

²¹ Two articles by Olly Wilson were landmarks in the analysis of style in African American Music (Wilson 1974; Wilson 1992). In the latter, Wilson developed his concept of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" that, he argued, typifies African American music. Samuel Floyd expanded and added historical dimension to Wilson's music-analytic arguments (Floyd 1995). Though subsequent scholars have systematically challenged Wilson's and Floyd's overreliance on "African retentions" theory (see, for example, Radano 2003), their work still provides astute observations about formal and stylistic features of black music in the US.

²² The literature explicating avant-garde jazz as a '60s phenomenon is voluminous and much of it covers the same historiographic and musicological ground, with only slight variations. Iain Anderson (2007) and Scott Saul (2003) provide lucid and complementary social histories of the emergence of avant-garde jazz; both also critically examine and synthesize the insights of previous work. See David Borgo (2005:13–35) for a concise explanation of the ways that avant-garde jazz represented a departure, in form and performance practice, from previous jazz.

²³ There is a broader thread of social-interactive stylistic affinity to trace here. In the "Postscript" to *Sound and Sentiment*, Steven Feld discusses how his Jewish, urban, Northeastern habitus enabled him to hear the high-involvement conversational style of the Kaluli as gregarious and warm, as opposed to "rough" (Feld 2012b). He also references Tannen's work on conversational style. Feld makes links between what he calls "lift-up-over-speaking" – the Kaluli style of talking – and the overarching Kaluli aesthetic of "lift-up-over sounding." In *Music Grooves*, Feld and Keil compare the Kaluli aesthetic to the "edge" (including the device of heterophony in ensemble textures) that they admire in African American musical styles (Keil and Feld 2005). Noting this common thread running through apparently different areas of scholarly inquiry lead me to think about the "rough edges" of sound in avant-jazz, the "participatory discrepancies" (Keil's notion of the micro-level variations of attack and intonation that give music a human quality) of various styles of music of the African Diaspora, the high-involvement talking style of New Yorkers, Kaluli, and other social formations, as all being subsumed under a broader aesthetic paradigm that appreciates the *roughness* and *graininess* of human expression in multiple modalities, interpreting that roughness as a mark of

Hearing, Watching, Feeling and Writing “Listening”

In his ethnography of boxing in Chicago’s African-American ghetto, *Body and Soul*, Loïc Wacquant thematizes how his particular object of study presents profound challenges to existing methods of doing and writing ethnography. He considers boxing to be an endeavor that dissolves the dichotomy of theory and practice:

How to account anthropologically for a practice that is so intensely corporeal, a culture that is thoroughly kinetic, a universe in which the most essential is transmitted, acquired, and deployed beneath language and consciousness—in short, for an *institution made man* (or men) situated at the extreme practical and theoretical edge of practice? (Wacquant 2004:xi, italics in original)

Finally, to become a boxer is to appropriate through progressive impregnation a set of corporeal mechanisms and mental schemata so intimately imbricated that they erase the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, between what pertains to athletic abilities and what belong to moral capacities and will. (17)

Wacquant sees in boxing a practice that is all exteriority. If there is no theoretical knowledge in boxing that can be abstracted from the bodily knowledge that brings its movements into being, then boxing theory *is* the learned motions that make up the physical repertory of the boxer. The challenge for Wacquant, the ethnographer of boxing, is to write bodily movement, to put what he learned about being a boxer (by training as one) into words.

Setting listening as the object of study appears to pose the opposite challenge to ethnographic method. Upon first reflection, listening would seem to be a practice that is all interiority. In recent years, *listening* has become a topic of inquiry in several fields and

authenticity, sincerity, and the “real.” Often, as it does within the LES scene, the characteristic of roughness is thought to iconically represent the quality of *being human*, of humanness itself.

disciplines, including ethnomusicology, popular music studies, the anthropology of the senses, and the growing field of sound studies, which draws its primary methodological and theoretical orientations from cultural studies, history, and science and technology studies. The anthropology of sound and sound studies are two fields that have particularly problematized the dominance of visual data in philosophical, scholarly, and popular conceptions of culture (e.g., Bendix 2000; Bijsterveld and Pinch 2012; Bull and Back 2003; Erlmann 2004; Feld 1996; Sterne 2012a). Ethnomusicologists and music historians have provided accounts of historically- and culturally-contingent notions of how to listen to (and thus how to interpret) music (e.g., Bull 2007; Downey 2002; Gray 2013; Johnson 1995; Katz 2004; Novak 2008). Scholars working in science and technology studies have investigated how changes in scientific knowledge and the emergence of new technologies – both those that measure sound and those that produce sound – effected shifts in cultural (de)valuations of sonic phenomena in social, and particularly urban, life (e.g., Picker 2003; Sterne 2003; Sterne 2012b; Thompson 2002). By “listening,” I mean the combination of perceiving sounds and interpreting them as meaningful. I am interested in “listening” as a set of aesthetic and interpretive skills that individuals cultivate in relation with one another, and as a subset of the broader range of practices encompassed in musicking (Small 1998).²⁴

One could argue that dancing and moving to music, which communicate something about one’s audition of music into the visual and haptic domains,

²⁴ Learning how to listen properly with a stethoscope, for instance, is also an interpretive aural skill one must cultivate (Rice 2012), but one without an aesthetic dimension (or at least without the same aesthetic dimensions as music listening).

“externalize” listening. But in the LES scene, dancing typically occurs only if a dancer performs *with* musicians; there is no culture of audience dancing. Bodily movements occur, but aside from codified practices like clapping and uttering vocal praise, physical “responses” are either restrained, extremely brief, or semantically ambiguous – an audience member shakes her head, another may wince for a brief moment, a third might work to sit completely still. In everyday spoken conversation, a horizontal oscillation of one’s head communicates a negative reaction, “no.” Yet among LES scene members, as among many jazz listeners and participants in other music genres, shaking one’s head has acquired the opposite meaning, signaling approval or adulation. How to interpret the wince? Is it a semiotic inversion similar to the head-shaking that signals affirmation? Or a wince of embarrassment at a bungled improvisation? Is the decision to sit still motivated by a wish to focus one’s aural concentration, or is it a sign of boredom?

The reality to which all ethnographers of musical practices and cultures must attend is that musical listening does not occur in a sensorial or social vacuum. Even when one listens to music with the intention of mentally and aurally concentrating on one’s perception and interpretation of sonic elements and details, the experience involves senses other than the auditory and movements beyond the vibration of one’s tympanic membrane and ossicles. Paying close ethnographic attention to aural experience necessarily requires the researcher to consider how hearing is informed by seeing (e.g., a musician’s movements in a live setting, the movements and facial expressions of fellow audience members, venue lighting, cover and/or package design of an album or recording); how any interpretive aural act fundamentally involves memory (e.g., of other

performances, other recordings, events); and how any listening experience is shaped by social interactions and relations, whether they are taking place during the moment of listening or whether they have taken place months or years before.²⁵

Towards the end of his philosophical essay on the nature of listening to music, Peter Szendy addresses himself to the reader:

“The listener I am is nothing, does not exist so long as you are not there. There or elsewhere, it doesn’t matter, so long as my listening is addressed to you. The listener I am [*que je suis*] can happen only when I follow you [*je te suis*], when I pursue you. I could not listen without you, without this desire to listen to you listening to me, not being able, since I am unable to listen to me listening” (Szendy 2008)

Szendy suggests that the sociality of listening, the desire to share the pleasures of aural experience, arises from the inability of listening to be reflexive. In other words, we cannot hear ourselves (or someone else) listening the way we can see ourselves (or someone else) looking. The impossibility of one’s listening becoming an object of perception spurs on the desire to make listening an intersubjective experience.²⁶

In the moment, listening to music may *feel* like an intensely private, personal, and intimate act. Yet this very experience of interiority is shaped in and through social discourse, and person-to-person interaction; it is socially mediated. This seeming

²⁵ Discussing the dynamics of communication about music, Steven Feld writes: “...the listener is implicated as a socially and historically situated being, not just as organs that receive and respond to stimuli” (Feld 1984).

²⁶ I use “intersubjective” in the sense that anthropologist Michael Jackson has developed the term. Jackson’s extended discussion of intersubjectivity means that his use of the term is rich and layered. But the following two excerpts convey important aspects for me: “I begin by noting that the social is lived as a network of reciprocal relationships among subjects, that is to say, intersubjectively. This implies, first, that human beings everywhere tend to conceive of subjectivity not only as encompassing others but as extending into the extra-human world, with the result that objects, words, and ideas tend to become imbued with consciousness and will” (Jackson 2002b:334–335), and, “The task for anthropology is to recover the sense in which experience is situated *within* relationships and *between* persons if the lifeworld is to be explored as a field of intersubjectivity and not reduced to objective structures *or* subjective intentions.” (Jackson 1996:26, italics in original).

contradiction *produces* “listening.” By “produces,” I mean that social interactions imbue the human ability to perceive acoustic phenomena with one’s ears with intellectual and affective richness. These forms of richness, these meanings and feelings that we experience as both contained within and elicited by musical sound, are what distinguish my conception of “listening” as cultural practice from the basic, cognitive faculty of hearing that our ears provide. “Listening” is something which we can do out of choice.²⁷

My goal is to give a careful and clear-eyed account of the social construction of aural experience within the LES scene while still communicating something of the “magic” that listeners experience during moments of music which strike them as being extraordinary, intensified, special. The realities that one *learns* how to listen to music and to conceive of deeply-felt listening experiences as intimate and even private does not diminish the extent to which one’s experience of music as “beyond description,” “overwhelming” or “magical” feels and therefore is *real*.

²⁷ In *Metal, Rock, and Jazz*, Berger lays out an argument for treating *individual listening experience* as something that is inherently socially constructed. For Berger, keeping the goals of phenomenology at hand “implies an awareness that experience *can* be shared, that concrete experience itself has some public dimension, and that some of the dynamics of those experiences can be mapped out” (Berger 1999: 120). In tracing the public circulation of affect among *fado* aficionados, Gray (2013) explores similar issues of exploring the supposed “interiority” of listening and affect. In *The Audible Past*, Sterne argues that notions of sound that circulate in US culture have their roots in Christian theology. Even scholarly and ostensibly atheistic discussions that construe the aural as *internal* and transcendent (in opposition to the exteriority and worldliness of the written) bear the influence of Christian thought (Sterne 2003:10, ff.). Similarly interested in reveal the social-discursive construction of musical experience as transcendent and *nondiscursive*, Radano writes: “Without reducing musical expression to the larger sphere of discourse, we need to acknowledge the simple fact of music as a social phenomenon if we are to comprehend the true extent of its significance...music’s place in the social and its impact on the listener develop from the way that sound actually inhabits the very tissues of the discursive, just as the saturation of ambiguous meanings that music contains (as the ultimate polysemic sign vehicle) produces a quality of experience exceeding full linguistic grasp” (Radano 2003).

If LES scene members (like other listeners) often find themselves confronted by the gap between the richness of their aural experience and the apparent inadequacy of words in expressing that richness, it is a gap to which they continually return.²⁸ Listeners dance around the gap with words during listening, with smiles exchanged while listening together in clubs, with suggestions to one another about which CDs or musicians to check out. A nod or “hello” to a recognized face at a music venue is perhaps one of the most timid ways of acknowledging the gap between music heard and feelings verbalized. The very sharing of physical space – of being in the same space, listening at the same time – is a way of engaging with this gap. The profound emotions that arise during intense moments of listening perhaps reach deeper when we know that others, too, have been touched. The ineffability felt when one confronts this gap catalyzes or generates further listening experiences, of further interpretations of musical sound, and, in the sharing of that sound, of the process of working and reworking social relations.²⁹

The “gap” confronts listeners as a condition of the world, perhaps almost as part of the *natural world*, something *out there* that cannot be fundamentally altered. Like forces of gravity, or the properties of acoustics themselves, the gap between musical experience and the language we have to speak or write about that experience gives form and shape to the experiences. The gap creates limits that act like walls of a room - without walls, there would be no room. The limits act like the ground beneath our feet that allows

²⁸ In discussing the unfolding process of talking about what one hears in music, Feld writes that listeners “are caught in a moment of interpretive time, trying to force awareness to words”(Feld 1984:14).

²⁹ For other work that considers the inability of language to fully convey musical experience to be a *productive* condition capable of generating musical activity and enriching aural experience, see (Fox 2004; Gray 2013; Meintjes 2003).

us to walk. Sometimes the ground challenges our attempts to walk (a steep hill, or soft and muddy ground), but however vexing, it is the ground, or a solid surface, that makes “walking” a possibility.³⁰

As this study foregrounds the social construction and practice of listening, my goal is to be particularly reflexive about how I approach and negotiate the music-language “gap.” I write about and represent musical sound in several modes that index the different subject positions I inhabit as jazz aficionado, amateur musician, music scholar, and ethnographer.³¹ I perform the majority of the close analyses of musical sound included in this dissertation with descriptive prose. Within the medium of the written word, I employ different registers of prose; these registers could be measured in their degrees of formality, but that is not the exclusive feature of variation. During certain passages of immersive ethnographic description, I write from *within* the subject position of a jazz aficionado: this means using prose that is often highly figurative, and at times evaluative. During other descriptions of moments in the field, I use a combination of poetic metaphor and music-analytic terminology to write my hearing of musical sound (an example of this is my description of *Looking Ahead* above). In other passages, where I shift to a less “emic” perspective, in order to analyze a specific ethnographic encounter or provide theoretical

³⁰ In light of the “linguocentric predicament” that confronts music scholars, Charles Seeger (1977) proposed a highly-regimented, macro-level strategy for navigating the potentially hazardous epistemological chasm between music and language. Feld’s “Communication, Music, and Speech about Music” (1984) was itself a response to Seeger’s preoccupation with the limitations of the “linguocentric predicament.”

³¹ Thomas Porcello (1998) calls attention to the multiple subject positions an ethnographer of music must negotiate and employs differently-styled authorial registers to reflect these shifts in perspective. Kathleen Stewart (2007) presents another theorization of how to create a purposeful relationship between representational form to experiential content. She uses the third person to refer to herself in descriptive passages, in order to index her positionality *within* the social reality and world she writes about.

or historical exposition, I employ the technical language of jazz and Western music theory more liberally (e.g., concepts and terms such as “walking bass lines,” “substitute chords,” “straight” vs. “swung” eighth notes) while tethering in figurative, affective, and evaluative language.³² The hope is that those instances where I use music-theoretical vocabulary are deliberate enough to allow the reader untrained in Western music theory to follow my arguments and discussions. The major exception to my generally frugal use of music theory terminology occurs in Chapter 5, where I venture into more extended analyses that employ Western music theory, as well as music notation. As I discuss in greater detail in that chapter, my move into a form of discussion and analysis that resembles more traditional styles of music analysis was largely inspired by my interlocutors and the nature and content of our conversations.

The Path to the Lower East Side

As I outline above, the various names applied to the Lower East Side and to avant-garde jazz, historically and in contemporary circulation, imply that neighborhood inhabitants and scene participants do not share a definitive or singular notion of the place or the music. At various times during and after fieldwork, I doubted that I was even

³² My use of music theory terminology conforms to standard usage in Anglophone music scholarship. Jazz music theory and Western music theory share a large vocabulary, though there are significant instances of difference. I use terminology specific to jazz practice when I feel those terms more accurately delineate the sonic phenomena I wish to identify. For instance, I refer to Cecil Taylor’s “comping” even though a musicologist trained in Western art music might think of the accompaniment a jazz pianist plays as part of the rhythm section to constitute a *continuo* part. For me, using the latter would be an act of epistemological imperialism, as jazz cultures have already established a clear and precise vocabulary to name musical phenomena. Berliner (1994) and Monson (1996) both provide insightful discussions of the terminology and musical concepts jazz musicians share. When I feel a “classical” term more accurately names the sonic phenomena under discussion, I use the language of Western music theory (e.g., “melisma” or “arpeggio”).

studying something that could be called a “scene.” While saxophonist/composer John Zorn manages a venue that showcases avant-jazz (among other idioms of free improvisation) and has demonstrated ties to jazz traditions both through his music and words, there were many in the scene who did not consider Zorn to be part of the *avant-jazz* scene, though they did consider him to be part of the “Downtown” scene.³³ On the question of genre and labels, one musician in the avant-jazz scene told me: “I just do what I do. Whatever it is it is. And, you know, sometimes ‘avant-garde jazz’ seems to be the proper category sometimes ‘jazz,’ sometimes neither.” Above, I describe the Vision Festival as playing the role of standard-bearer for the LES avant-jazz scene; yet on several occasions scene participants complained about the monotony that had crept into the Festival’s programming in recent years. Similarly, several times scene members took me into their confidence to vent about another scene member, criticize a musician’s recent performance or recording, or share other potentially injurious opinions.

“Oh, it’s *definitely* a community. Definitely,” said one scene member.

“We’re all just one big unhappy family!” I heard this barb, or close variations thereof, several times.

What kind of scene is this? What does it mean to write about the “LES avant-jazz scene”? In seeking to bring greater specificity to New York-based jazz ethnography, I limited my inquiry to a relatively small geographical area and made a point to

³³ George Lewis describes various experimental music scenes in New York, and calls the scene that Zorn helped to shape “Downtown II” (in the sense that the scene, which arose in the 1970s, constituted a kind of second generation after the earlier “Downtown I,” of which John Cage was a member). Lewis points out that “Downtown II” is made up of primarily white musicians. He further notes that while music critics have accepted the anti-genre discourse of musicians of “Downtown II,” they have consistently expected experimental musicians who are black to account for their generic affiliations (Lewis 2008).

communicate with individuals with ties to one another. Because the LES scene *is* a small social formation, many of its members maintain relationships to one another on various social planes. To chart the lines of metaphoric kinship would result in a dense, scrambled mess. In spite of my occasional doubts about there being such a thing as the LES avant-jazz scene, I perceived the overlapping relations and the messy networks they form as something resembling a community, during the *course* of fieldwork. Part of making inroads into the scene was discovering the multitude of bonds, commitments, and disputes that animate the relationships of scene members.

In early January 2009 I moved to New York City to begin ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation; at that point its scope was broad: an ethnographic study of aural experience among people who self-identify as “jazz listeners.” It was both a return and a new venture – treating my hometown as a field site, a place where I (hopefully) could conduct rewarding fieldwork, but also an object of study in itself. It was presumably to my advantage that I knew this city and had lived in it for most of my life. I would not have to get my bearings with regard to different social practices, a strange geography, or a foreign language. I *would* have to reacquaint myself with the city’s multiple jazz scenes, get a sense of where the gigs that would attract serious listeners were happening.

At the onset, my field method was simple, broad, and open-ended: start going to (affordable) performances at jazz venues and see where my ears and eyes took the process. My fieldnotes from the first several weeks of my research document the confusion and uncertainty. I was searching for the good clubs to frequent, but I was also searching for what exactly I considered my object(s) of study.

I noted demographics in venues I visited – audiences’ ethnic background, age, gender, clothing style, social style, and from that I tried to work up a sense of what kinds of people were going to these places. I scribbled notes about the audiences’ behavior: how often they clapped, how loud the applause was, whether or not there was any bobbing of heads, swaying of bodies, bodily signs of response to and interaction with the music. I tried to find ways of interpreting my observations of anonymous listeners. All the while I hoped I would start recognizing familiar faces. Perhaps serendipity would throw me a bone and one of them would recognize me and break the ice.

The first field interview I recorded took place in mid-February with Steven Joerg, the owner and manager of the AUM Fidelity record label. In the months prior to fieldwork I had ordered several CDs directly from the label’s website. Joerg recognized me as a repeat customer and expressed his gratitude in emailed order confirmations; once I was engaged in fieldwork I saw this as an opening. At the end of a performance by William Parker at the Stone, I ventured to guess that the man standing near a merchandise table displaying AUM Fidelity releases and chatting with several people in the room was Joerg. I introduced myself and told him I was now living in New York to research a dissertation on jazz listeners. We exchanged some enthusiastic comments about the performance we’d just heard. I later emailed Joerg to ask if I might meet with him to talk about his personal history with jazz.

At the end of our interview, Joerg asked me if I was aware of a performance by the “long lost” free-jazz saxophonist Giuseppi Logan that was set to take place the following

night at the Bowery Poetry Club (BPC). I was not, but decided that in the spirit of going with the flow of fieldwork I should go.

At Logan's performance in the BPC, I met two people who would prove crucial in my fieldwork, Steve Dalachinsky and Yuko Otomo. We were introduced by a gregarious friend of theirs, a middle-aged poet and self-described "post-hippie" who calls himself Sparrow. I fell into an almost instant rapport with Steve and Yuko. They were willing to talk to me about their experiences in following avant-garde jazz in New York. Steve had been writing poetry inspired by jazz for years. During our second or third meeting Yuko confided to me that Steve was very pleased that a scholar wanted to interview him about his own listening practices, rather than tap his knowledge about avant-jazz musicians, many of whom he knew personally.

A couple of weeks after first meeting Steve and Yuko, while I was perusing jazz events calendars online, I noticed a listing of two sets of jazz for the low price of \$12. I hadn't heard of the venue before, a bar named "the Local 269." I went with no idea that the two sets were part of the RUCMA series, which was organized by AFA, the same non-profit organization that produces the Vision Festival. I still was not aware of Steve's long history with the Vision Festival and its cofounders and organizers – William Parker and Patricia Nicholson Parker.

Steve and Yuko introduced me to many of my other interlocutors. They all had some connection to the Vision Fest or avant-garde jazz in Manhattan. Since Steve had known these people for years, his introduction carried enough weight for other scene members to give this graduate student the benefit of the doubt. I saw that Steve

Dalachinsky knew Steven Joerg, who produced recordings by William Parker, Matthew Shipp, Roy Campbell - avant-jazz musicians who were Dalachinsky's personal friends. I also noticed that Dalachinsky's and Yuko's friend Steve Holtje, an amateur composer, part-time music critic, and copy-editor of scientific scholarly texts, was a huge fan of Charles Gayle, the saxophonist about whom Dalachinsky had published a book of poetry.

Over the weeks of March and April, as I continued going to gigs at the Local 269, the Stone, Roulette, and the Bowery Poetry Club, and talked with listeners I was meeting, I started to recognize faces in the audience and on the bandstand at these venues. In the megalopolis of New York City and its labyrinth of jazz worlds, where numerous scenes and "microscenes" overlapped and intersected, I had found something like a community, however porous and irregular it might be.

In September 2009 my personal and ethnographic social networks intersected: "Oh, you're talking to people who are into avant-garde jazz? You've really gotta meet Barbara; she knows a bunch of the musicians and books them at the Brecht Forum," John Glover told me over beers at my apartment on 133rd Street one evening. Glover is a friend I'd met at a party in Washington Heights in the summer of 2009. A composer himself, Glover knew Barbara because both worked in an administrative capacity for the American Composers Orchestra. "Brecht Forum" – I'd heard Steve and Yuko mention this place, but had not yet ventured over because following performances at venues that had become "regular spots" already kept me busy. "Barbara" was Barbara Burch, a crucial member of the volunteer collective that runs *Neues Kabarett*, a music series featuring avant-jazz hosted by the Brecht Forum.

John introduced me to Barbara during my first visit to the Brecht Forum. Once the performance had begun, I noticed Steve and Yuko quietly creeping in to join the audience. I had forgotten to mention to them that I was coming to the gig that night. After the performance ended, Barbara saw Steve and I talking and walked over to us.

“Steve, *you know this guy?*”

“Yeah, he’s one of my...best pals.”

“And *you know John?*” Barbara continued. I nodded. “*That’s SO fucked UP!*” She said with laughter.

Writing around Fictive Borders: the LES Scene as Fieldsite, and a Note on Method

On one of our many westward walks along Houston St from the Lower East Side to the corner of Houston and Sullivan, Steve Dalachinsky remarked that I was bound to talk with many of the same people as other scholars because the (jazz) scene is so small, “especially if you’re not looking to write about Wynton Marsalis and Lincoln Center and that stuff.”³⁴ At play is the somewhat paradoxical social position of participants in the LES avant-jazz scene. These people are musicians, recording engineers, critics, artists, intellectuals who possess significant amounts of cultural capital; they are poets well-

³⁴ In citing Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) as the only other jazz world or scene it would be plausible for me to study, Steve implies a dichotomy of stylistic extremes. He uses JALC as a caricature of “mainstream” jazz while glossing over the many gradations of “mainstream” jazz that can be heard in New York. Even within the confines of Lower Manhattan, there are numerous clubs that present music from any stylistic location within the jazz continuum. Steve is well aware of this stylistic variety, and attends gigs at “mainstream” clubs like Birdland and the Village Vanguard regularly. In proposing that I was bound to end up doing fieldwork around the LES scene, I believe he was getting at the close-knit quality of the scene (the overlapping layers of metaphoric kinship) as well as scene members’ wish to make themselves visible, audible, and accessible.

versed in various bodies of literature, visual artists who have taught in educational institutions and are familiar with theories of aesthetics, musicians who have toured and performed internationally, listeners from various backgrounds who usually possess college degrees. In most cases, the economic capital of LES scenes is dwarfed by their “cultural wealth.”

The LES avant-jazz scene’s combination of high cultural capital and meager economic capital leads to the propensity of scene members to document the scene’s activities with remarkable diligence. AFA is always looking for ways to promote its mission, ways to secure financial support in an increasingly austere performing arts market. The presence of videographers at many (if not most) of the gigs I attended also gives evidence of this propensity. For instance, say I was at a gig where five musicians performed for an audience of twelve. Within that audience, there would be one person video-recording the performance, another painting in response to the music, a third writing poetry while listening, and a fourth writing down notes for a journalistic piece. Scene participants are also compelled by the dual motivations of maintaining a record of a history they feel is significant and of securing the scene’s future by creating a consumable archive of representations. Documentation bears witness to the past as it preserves a tradition for future generations.

Though the majority of scene members could hardly be called affluent (and many lived at or barely above subsistence), a small elite patronage helps the scene to survive. In particular, this patronage enables the practices of avid documenting and mediatizing I observed during fieldwork. A visible patron is John Zorn, whose musical career has been

lucrative enough that he has used some of his finances to maintain a joint record label/publishing company (Tzadik/Hips Road) and fund a venue dedicated to experimental music (the Stone) (Sisario 2013). Less visible patrons include the owner/managers of the Rogueart and Silkheart record labels, both men who made their financial fortunes in careers outside the music industry and created their record labels as labors of love.³⁵

Insofar as I came to focus upon a localized network of people whose relationships to one another were bound by a shared engagement with an expressive form, or as Howard Becker calls such a network, an “art world,” my field “site” and method resembled more traditional examples in the ethnographic literature. In other ways, my fieldwork departed from the older notion of going “into” the field to study a “culture.” My personal history as a jazz listener and sometime performer, and my self-identification as a native of New York City, caused the distinction between “fieldwork” and “real life” to become blurry, even nonexistent.³⁶

Very soon after beginning fieldwork, I abandoned the idea (which I had entertained) of attempting to model the mindset of a “novice” to jazz. While I did strive to maintain the openness and alertness that are ethical and epistemological

³⁵ Steve Dalachinsky, personal communication. Dalachinsky maintains personal and professional relationships with both label owners.

³⁶ For discussions of the blending of the ethnographer’s “fieldwork life” and “real life,” see (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Fox 2004; Ortner 2006:22–23). For Fox and Ortner, this blending is amplified by their “emic” positions, that is, as insiders studying their own cultures. In a similar vein, John Jackson conceives of his work on African American life and notions of “blackness” that circulate in Harlem as part “autoethnography” and writes: “The anthropologist/informant relationship is predicated, especially for the so-called native ethnographer, on the mutual search for sincerity: that anthropologists are not misrepresenting themselves for the sake of rapport, and that informants are not simply giving anthropologists what they think they want to hear” (Jackson 2005:27).

responsibilities of the ethnographer, I found it impossible to mentally suppress my personal, deeply affective history of listening to jazz. Instead, I endeavored to maintain a diligence about always comparing interlocutors' notions and experiences to my own.³⁷

Allaine Cerwonka writes, "Work and life come to be entangled in the embodied, situational, relational practice that constitutes long-term ethnographic fieldwork" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:6). This statement certainly describes my experience in "the field," and I write those entanglements into portions of the dissertation. I include mention of my own evaluation of performances or recordings when it played a role in my interactions in the LES scene. I discuss moments when events in my "personal" life shifted my understanding or interpretation of phenomena in the "field."

I attended live performances of avant-jazz, participated in informal talk with audience members and musicians, and observed interactions among scene members. When conditions permitted, I took notes during my visits to venues and gigs. Otherwise, I wrote out fieldnotes once I returned home. In addition, I recorded 29 semi-structured interviews resulting in over 75 hours of audio. I use quotation marks when reproducing spoken interactions transcribed from my recordings. I also use them for quotes that I wrote in my field notebook, during or immediately after the fact.

³⁷ The discussion of the ethnographic process in *Improvising Theory* influenced my orientation "in the field" profoundly, particularly the authors' argument, drawing from Gadamer's hermeneutics, that there exists no "whole picture" of an object of study, rather only "pictures" (understandings) *from* a given perspective. Similarly, in his exposition of phenomenological anthropology, Michael Jackson argues that the lived reality of "the subject" (including the subjectivity of the ethnographer) must inform theorization and knowledge production: "Our argument is that no matter what constituting power we assign the impersonal forces of history, language, and upbringing, the subject always figures, at the very least, as the site where these forces find expression and are played out" (Jackson 1996:22).

Just as I use different registers or modes of prose to represent aural experience, I modulate among different styles of ethnographic writing. I frequently use the present tense for extended passages in which I describe an event or moment observed during fieldwork to convey the sense of being in the midst of something that is taking shape.³⁸ A switch to the past tense after or during such a passage indicates a shift to a more reflective, discursive mode of analysis and theorizing. In addition to signaling my shifts in conceptual focus, my shifts in tense are meant to convey some of the phenomenological dimensions of listening and general lived experience. Despite the regularized spatialization of clock time, we experience temporal flow as fragmented, uneven, and irregular. Listening in the audience at a club, our minds jump back to seize a snippet of sound heard on a recording weeks or years ago. We listen back to something we said five minutes ago, or make mental notes about that must-hear gig later in the week, even as words continue to flow from our mouths in the present moment.

The Plan of the Present Study

The form of this dissertation mimics a process of familiarization I both observed and experienced during fieldwork. In the course of getting to know another person, an unfamiliar recording of music, or a strange place (such as a neighborhood, or the metaphoric place of a music scene), a movement of perspective takes place. During an initial encounter, you might apprehend the stranger or the unfamiliar recording as a

³⁸ Meintjes similarly argues that the present tense allows her to convey “concrete compact instances...without giving the impression that such concreteness implies that interpretations and values are fixed” (Meintjes 2003:15).

whole or gestalt, even as you begin to note small details in flickers of perception and observation. In the case of someone you've just met, you might notice a gesture with the hand, the general volume of speech. During the apperception of an unfamiliar recording, your ear might pick out a particular melodic phrase, or note that the guitarist's timbre is pleasing to you. With repeated exposure, you begin to comprehend some sort of order among the streets of a city, participants in a music scene, or instruments in a recording. You begin a metaphoric movement *inward* – perceptually closer to the particular sound-world of *this* album, further beyond the borders into the territory of a music scene, or affectively closer to this person whom you now consider an acquaintance. As your familiarity with this Object expands, you continue this conceptual zoom-in, noticing increasing amounts of detail. But at some point, this movement towards smaller sonic, metaphoric and physical spaces seems to invert itself. You realize that within a “small” music scene lies a variety of opinions, overlapping desires, and conflicting memories; that an album contains the traces of several histories of music-making; that a person can, as Whitman believed, contain multitudes.

Chapter 1 begins outdoors at an avant-jazz concert in one of the Lower East Side's community gardens. From the particularity of this concert, I turn to consider the overlapping histories of the Lower East Side and the jazz avant-garde. I argue that LES scene participants' knowledge of the neighborhood's history intensifies their perception of the “rough edges” of avant-jazz. This chapter's attention to histories also highlights the deep, and deeply affective, trope of historicity that animates jazz cultures (Solis 2008).

Chapter 2 zooms in to focus on smaller spaces: the clubs and venues in which I observed

performances of avant-jazz. I identify the “roughness” that each venue exhibits, thereby amplifying LES listeners’ experience of the scene as emplaced. In addition, I situate these early 21st-century venues within the longer history of jazz musicians’ marginalization within New York’s political economy. Chapter 3 keeps us in the venues to consider specific performances of avant-jazz. Close attention to these events yields the realization that listening and performance are so interwoven as to be indistinguishable practices. Avant-jazz musicians constantly listen to jazz history during performance, while listeners in the scene find various means of making their listening public.

In one sense, Chapters 4 and 5 complete the study’s movement from the macro to the micro, as they both focus upon particular scene members in order to present an account of the various ways that the act of listening is both constructed and realized socially. Chapter 4 considers scene members’ practices of narrative and collecting, arguing that these practices form primary strategies for making listening legible and shareable. In Chapter 5, I discuss a few listening sessions with scene members to explore the ways that individual listeners put to work the practices described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 also shows how scene members connect memories of their personal pasts to iconic events and countercultural forces of the long 1960s.

In another sense, however, the succession of topics in Chapters 3 through 5 creates a movement “outward.” The destination of this movement is the realm of intersubjective listening and talk about listening, a region whose feeling of intimacy belies its vast scope. Just as the moments of performance discussed in Chapter 3 open out onto

broader vistas of jazz history, within these moments of listening lie long trails of history and memory, and deep wells of feeling.

In the Conclusion, I return to considering a question touched upon in this Introduction and in Chapter 1: why listen to *this* genre of music at *this* particular historical moment in *this* location? Relatedly, I offer a critique of the ongoing attraction jazz scholars feel towards the avant-garde, while also reflecting on how this dissertation contributes to jazz studies and to ethnomusicology. After laying out these theoretical conclusions, I close by shifting my authorial position from a that of a scholar reporting on listeners who bear witness to a musical tradition that holds meaning for them to that of a subject with my own stories to tell. This change in voice performs an epistemological shift that I experienced during the research process, when a series of events concretized the fallacy of viewing “fieldwork” and “life” as separate domains of experience and gave me a deeper understanding of why people might want to bear witness.

Chapter 1

Setting the Scene:

The Lower East Side, the Jazz Avant-garde, and Histories of Marginality

1.1 Introduction

Sunday Afternoon, 13 Sept 2009 – El Jardin del Paraiso (East 4th to 5th Streets, between Avenues C & D)

Alto saxophone and cello sound into the open air of the garden. Rob Brown and Daniel Levin are improvising music; there are no predetermined structures. They play in this duo configuration often. Brown's sax projects more than Levin's cello, its sound cutting into the warm, late-summer air. The metallic buzz of reed and brass must reach the windows of nearby apartments, but there is reverberation, as we are outdoors.

A few families and some lone neighborhood residents hang out on benches towards the northern end of the garden. They are primarily black and Latino. Laughter and occasional shrieks float our way, the screams and laughs of children create a vague ambient backdrop. The garden is overgrown and disheveled. From inside, weeds nearly obscure the fence that divides the garden from the sidewalk of East 4th Street. We are gathered near the south end of the garden, in a relatively flat clearing of unkempt grass punctuated by a couple of large, old deciduous trees and some smaller bushes.

Tenements, the three-to-six-story buildings that have become an icon of New York's Lower East Side, flank El Jardin on the east and west. More tenements lie to the north and

south, across 4th and 5th Streets. Where we've gathered there is no bandstand, band shell, gazebo, or other indication of a performance space.

We are a motley group, the folks who have come out this afternoon in mid-September to help create and partake in Rise Up Creative Music and Arts' (RUCMA) "In Gardens" Series.¹ Rob Brown wears a brown short-sleeve button-front shirt, khaki shorts, and hiking sneakers. He's white, somewhere in his forties, tall, has runner's calves. Levin must be about Brown's age; his complexion is similarly fair, his hair about the same shade of brown. Bassist Albey Balgochian, who will soon accompany Steve Dalachinsky's recitation of his poetry, is wearing a dark t-shirt with a full-color print of a wolf's face on the front, faded black jeans, and pointy, amber leather boots. The front and sides of his head are nearly shaved, his pale white skin showing through the dark stubble. In back, a ponytail of nearly-black, wavy hair reaches just below the collar of his shirt. Roberta Berger wears a brightly-patterned magenta dress with highlights of blue and brown and holds a large fabric handbag of green, red, and blue. Thick, tightly-curved brown hair rises above her tinted glasses. Next to her sits her husband Richard, wearing a long-sleeved shirt in a muted gray/black check and blue jeans. Roberta, who is Italian-American, will later tell me that she is often mistaken for Jewish, while many people assume Richard, who *is* Jewish, to be Puerto Rican (presumably due to his olive complexion). The Bergers are in their early 60s. They come to many AFA events and volunteer for both the Vision Festival and the Neues Kabarett series at the Brecht Forum. Steve Dalachinsky - poet,

¹ RUCMA was the name of the regularly-scheduled music series produced by AFA during my fieldwork. The series has since been renamed "Evolving Music."

one-time building superintendent, self-identified jazz addict, and veteran LES scene member - wears a blue Mexican wedding shirt that hangs open to reveal a faded black t-shirt; these darker colors throw into relief his thick, silvery hair. Steve's jeans are faded a lighter black. Yuko Otomo, visual artist, poet, stalwart LES scene member (and Steve's wife), wears a silky blue shirt with white polka dots and dark gray corduroys. Yuko's glasses are off now. There are others whom I haven't formally met, whose names I do not know but whose faces I recognize. We range in age from 25 to somewhere around 80, though the majority of us are between 50 and 65. Most of us are white, though Yuko, the dancer Mariko, and videographer Robert O'Haire's wife are all of East Asian descent.

Besides our group – performers, friends and family of performers, and a graduate student volunteering for RUCMA while doing dissertation research – no one in the garden appears to be listening to Brown's and Levin's efforts. Then for, a few minutes, a neighborhood resident talking a stroll with his daughter hangs around to listen to and watch our goings-on. He wears a short-sleeved button-front shirt in a pale yellow, jeans dyed navy blue, Adidas retro sneakers in navy blue. A tattoo adorns the outside of his right forearm; a bit of his dirty-blond hair peeks out from under a grayish-blue military-style cap. His daughter wears a brightly-colored floral-patterned dress and Crocs...

§

What is the relevance of presenting a concert in this public, outdoor space? Why am I taking pains to note the precise geographic location of the garden? Why describe the phenotypic features, ethnic ancestry, and sartorial choices of these people? Why would

people gather in a shabby-looking garden to play and listen to such music – esoteric, rhythmically complex, full of harmonic dissonance?

This chapter treats the event I describe above as a point of departure to begin a more in-depth exploration of several of the dissertation's themes: music listening as an enplaced cultural practice; the dialogic play between synchronic music-making and diachronic awareness that shapes the aural experiences of scene participants; the role of Arts for Art, Inc. in mediating the cultural politics of aesthetics and reception within the LES scene; and the dynamics of intersubjective relationships among participants in the LES avant-jazz scene.

I argue that for the people assembled at this performance, as for many participants in the LES avant-jazz scene of the 2000s, to hear the music with aural acuity and with empathy is to hear the neighborhood's histories of class and ethnic struggle. Hearing the neighborhood means hearing the history of its underprivileged residents, "ethnics" who have lived on the fringes of white America, just as avant-jazz in the 21st century lives on the fringes of jazz as defined and promulgated by the music industry. Both histories speak of marginalization and of the cultural politics around labels and naming. Both histories have left affective and material residue - residue that reanimates the human achievements and foibles, the human lives, that make up the stories of the LES and of avant-garde jazz.

A key task of this chapter is to provide a "thick" historical background for this performance. By "thick," I mean that I situate the performance in El Jardin within two overlapping, yet distinct, histories: the politico-economic history of the Lower East Side, and the socio-aesthetic history of anti-mainstream currents in jazz since the emergence of

the jazz avant-garde in the late 1950s. Following the expositions of these histories, I bring a third history into the discussion: that of the "hipster" figure. While the meanings attached to the word "hipster" in U.S. popular discourse have shifted several times since the term's appearance in the 1940s, the "hipster" has consistently functioned as a trope of aestheticized marginality.

Marginality – social, economic, or aesthetic – links these three histories together. But who has been pushed to the margins in these histories? Who has voluntarily claimed a marginal position? And on what authority have those claims been made? The Sunday afternoon performance in El Jardin must be understood in the context of these histories of marginalized people and musical styles. The project of AFA's "In Gardens" series is to make avant-jazz accessible to the public of the neighborhood from which the musical tradition emerged.² In presenting a series of music performances that take place in various community gardens around the Lower East Side, AFA symbolically articulates the music-aesthetic history of avant-jazz to the specific social place of the Lower East Side. By literally bringing avant-jazz out into the neighborhood's public spaces, AFA defines avant-jazz as a music *of* that neighborhood.

1.2 A History of Marginality I: the Lower East Side of New York

Steve Dalachinsky said, "We need this music now more than ever" during his introduction to Giuseppe Logan's February 2009 "comeback" performance at the Bowery

²The description of the series on AFA's website reads: "AFA takes a direct approach to connecting innovative art to communities. These FREE In Garden shows take place in community gardens, making music available to students, parents, fans, garden members and passer-bys [*sic*]."

Poetry Club. On one hand, it was a cliché of promotional talk, a hyperbolic jab to get the crowd revved up. Yet there was an implicit specificity in the plug. The belief that music is something one *could* need cannot be assumed as axiomatic, especially when considering U.S. politicians' repeated suggestions to drastically cut funding for performing arts programs at public universities.³ Both cultural elitists and populists have explicitly and implicitly viewed regular music-making (including listening) as part of a healthy human existence. The cultural enrichment project of Leonard Bernstein's various music-educational programs for broadcast television are an example of the former, while Pete Seeger's performance of an all-inclusive solidarity via his exhortations to sing along are an example of the latter. It would be surprising, however, to hear a host introduce a chart-topping recording artist by reminding the audience of their need for his or her music. Reminders (or declarations) like Dalachinsky's accompany cultural production that lives under a threat of extinction, neglect, or suppression.

What was the "now" Dalachinsky had in mind when he spoke the phrase? Though I felt I intuitively knew that evening in February, our subsequent conversations and interactions provided evidence. Steve was referring to the global economic crisis that erupted in September 2008, the aftermath of which was continued to unfold in early 2009. He was referring to the series of unanswered questions that had piled up for left-wing New Yorkers since about 2000, and which continued to weigh upon them in their daily

³One only has to perform an internet search using the phrases "funding cuts arts" or "funding cuts music" to yield a plethora of journalism on the topic, from reportage on implemented cuts to articles using various kinds of evidence to argue that such cuts would result in educational, social, and, most important to policy makers, *economic* detriments.

lives: what ever happened to the Florida recount in the election that resulted in George W. Bush's presidency? When would the US's war with Iraq, and its occupation of that country, end? Why did the federal government insist, despite an apparent lack of evidence, that the goal of this war was to eradicate the threat Iraq posed to the well-being of the US? Why did the cost of living in New York continue to escalate for the lower and middle classes, even as city and state governments approved a deal with Goldman Sachs that included over \$100 million in tax breaks as an incentive to build its new headquarters in the Financial District, near the site of the September 11 attacks (Bagli 2005)? On a more local scale, he was referring to the ongoing disappearance of the lower Manhattan neighborhoods he had known for most of his life: older buildings housing independently-owned businesses were being razed and replaced by much taller luxury condos; corporate retail chains such as Walgreens, Starbucks. Even more specifically, he was referring to the increasingly precarious life that experimental and anti-mainstream musical idioms were living in and around the Lower East Side, this in bitter contrast to the area's history as a breeding ground for avant-garde jazz, psychedelic rock, punk, and other experiments in music. He was referring to the closings of CBGB's in 2006 and Tonic in 2007. The former had been hallowed ground for rockers since the mid-70s; the latter acted as a home base for the LES avant-jazz scene from 1998 until its closing.

What about the longer history that precedes the moment in early 2009? In the Introduction, I noted that the Lower East Side (in its older and geographically broader definition) sat on the socioeconomic margins of New York City for much of the 20th

century. This marginality goes back further, to the middle of the 1800s, when the area was home to poor immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and later East Europeans and Jews. Janet Abu-Lughod describes the history of the LES as occurring in "cycles" of disinvestment and reinvestment (Abu-Lughod 1994:-). She identifies two successive cycles that directly inform the ways in which AFA discursively defines avant-jazz as music *of* the Lower East Side.

In the first of these two cycles, large numbers of Puerto Ricans migrated to the area beginning in the early 1950s as the European and Jewish populations, who had secured some measure of economic stability, moved out to the suburbs of New York City. The city built several housing projects; these projects, in concert with influx of the latest working-poor immigrant population, caused property values within the LES to remain low through the 1960s. At the same time that the working-class demographics of the Lower East Side shifted from European to Latino, artists, writers and musicians who could not afford to live in the more expensive Greenwich Village moved into the "East Village." The second cycle began during the financial crises New York City faced during the 1970s. The Lower East Side experienced mass disinvestment: witnessing the continuing fall in property values, landlords abandoned their buildings. The area became a slum inhabited by squatters and neglected by the city. By the end of the 1970s, the city was eager pass these abandoned buildings off to developers and real estate speculators (Abu-Lughod 1994: 343, ff.).

Though bits and pieces of the Lower East Side began to gentrify, property values remained low during 1980s. This encouraged a new influx of musicians, painters, and

writers who often aligned themselves with working-class residents' attempts to resist gentrification. Some of the artists joined an existing community of squatters. The reasons people had for squatting were numerous: some were radical activists for whom squatting represented a form of social resistance; in abandoned buildings, carpenters, sculptors and painters could have their own work studios *and* live in the same space; musicians likewise could both live in abandoned buildings and host performances and rehearsals, while avoiding the expensive rents elsewhere in Manhattan; some were homeless who found longterm shelter. As a compromise, the city established the homesteading program, whereby the city government granted title to occupants of abandoned buildings on the condition that they committed to renovating the buildings and bringing them up to code. Musicians were among those who benefited from the homesteading program. Among these was LES scene icon William Parker, who was a member of a homesteading group. In 1988, in keeping with the city's program, this group purchased the East Village building they had thoroughly renovated at the bargain rate of \$250 per apartment.⁴

Perhaps even more than the homesteaders' transformation of abandoned buildings, the community gardens of the East Village have attained primacy as a symbol of decades of working-class resistance to displacement by municipal neglect or real estate development.⁵ New York's first community garden was established on the Lower East

⁴For more on squatters, the city's homesteading program, and the Lower East Side during the 1980s, see Abu-Lughod (1994: 286-311), (Mele 2000:220-280), and Zukin (Zukin 2010:95-122). For more on William Parker's relationship to the neighborhood, see (Patterson, Flood, and Moore 2007:573-582).

⁵The following historical overview of the debates around New York's community gardens is a condensation of Sharon Zukin's discussion of the history of community gardens in New York (Zukin 2011: 196-207). Zukin's third and sixth chapters bring the inquiry into the Lower East Side's history of class struggle nearly

Side in 1973, near the intersection of the Bowery and Houston St. In the 1970s, middle-class activists allied with the working-class residents to transform the many overgrown, trash-filled vacant lots dotting the Lower East Side/East Village into consistently maintained public gardens. Initially ignoring this unofficial repurposing of land, the city remained at best ambivalent about the spread of community gardens. During the 1980s, the administration of Mayor Ed Koch made several moves towards reclaiming the land. Tensions between city government and the gardeners gradually increased into the 1990s. In the 1990s, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani aggressively pushed to auction the city-owned garden lots to private investors. Some gardeners took advantage of shifting environmental politics and protested on the grounds that the city would be doing environmental harm if it allowed developers to remove the gardens. In 1999, New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer took notice of these protests and sued the city for violating state environmental law. Giuliani's bulldoze-and-sell policy ended, but not before the city had auctioned off dozens of garden lots.

By the end of the 20th century, the gentrification of northern portion of the Lower East Side more often called the "East Village," as well as areas south of Houston St, had become irrevocable. Real estate developers and other entrepreneurs deployed signifiers of the neighborhood's multiethnic, working-class history to create what Christopher Mele (2000) calls the East Village "brand." Mele writes, "What constitutes the East Village

to the present day. Reading Abu-Lughod (1994) Mele (2000), and Zukin (2010) together provides a thorough exposition of the social history of the Lower East Side.

'brand' is a stylized and depoliticized subversion borrowed from past and present images, symbols, and rhetorics of protest, resistance, and experimentation" (287).

The accelerating gentrification of the East Village in the early 21st century gave the community gardens a new kind of cultural cachet: they now stood as icons of the neighborhood's history of left-wing activism and anti-bourgeois lifestyles. Mayor Michael Bloomberg made public health, including access to healthy food, one of the focuses of his administration. The gardens received support from city agencies with the understanding that they would provide nutrition and enhance quality of life.

1.21 El Jardin II

The afternoon's proceedings got off to a rough start. Soon after learning of the "In Gardens" series sometime in late August, I had volunteered to help "MC" the concert in El Jardin. One of the main ideas behind the series was to schedule performances in several community gardens simultaneously, so there were other concerts taking place in similar gardens scattered around the East Village and the Lower East Side. Simultaneity and multiplicity were parts of the idea behind the "In Gardens" series.

El Jardin del Paraiso is one of the larger community gardens located on the eastward bulge of lower Manhattan. The streets of Manhattan divide the land up into hundreds of blocks. From an aerial view (or a map), one can see that these blocks often take the form of rectangles. El Jardin lies a bit left of the center of its rectangle, making it a bit closer to Avenue C than it is to Avenue D. It spans the north-south range of the block from 4th to 5th Street.

After checking in at AFA headquarters at the Clemente Soto Velez Center on Suffolk St and picking up copies of the program for that Sunday, I walked north and east toward my destination. The program stated that El Jardin was located on E 4th St between Avenues B and C. I walked the long span of the "avenue" block from B to C, but could not find El Jardin.⁶ Anxiety began to set in. I walked quickly I began to scout out the surrounding blocks for the garden. I found a few other community gardens as I paced Aves B and C, up to 5th Street, back down to 3rd, etc. I read the plaque next to the entrance of each garden in the hope that I had the right one. The minutes passed, and I could not find my garden.

I recognized bassist Albey Balgochian as I was walking (probably more like scurrying by then) westward along 4th Street. Hoping he knew the location of El Jardin, I introduced myself and told him I was the AFA volunteer for his "In Gardens" event. All he knew was what was printed in the program. We briefly commiserated about the aggravation and began to walk east again. After crossing Ave C, I spotted bassist Francois Grillot, who is also supposed to perform in El Jardin, standing and talking to a young woman. As Albey and I approached, I saw that Grillot and the woman (who turned out to be Mariko, the dancer) were standing in front of the entrance to a community garden.

My heart sank as I read the plaque, "El Jardin del Paraiso." It was about fifteen minutes after the scheduled start time for the concert. My mind grew agitated with

⁶In most of Manhattan, streets (running west to east) and avenues (running north to south) form a grid filled in by rectangular blocks. New Yorkers often say that "20 blocks equal the distance of a mile." This measurement, however, implicitly refers to "street blocks," the sides of the rectangular blocks that join street to street (e.g., 4th St, 5th St, 6th St). Street blocks are far shorter than "avenue blocks" – the expanses that join avenue to avenue. Paradoxically, one walks an "avenue block" on a street, and vice versa.

questions: where was the "garden rep" from the New York Parks Department who was supposed to be my contact? How did AFA get the location wrong on the program? What was my role now – was I supposed to stand on the sidewalk and try to spot the other performers? I'd recognize the performers, but how would I recognize audience members I'd never seen before? How many people would even be coming to this thing?

Soon Steve and Yuko showed up. All of us began to vent frustrations about the misprint in the program, the unkempt overgrown look of the garden, the increasingly late start to the event. Avid listeners Richard and Roberta Berger, and Peter Cox arrive together. Perhaps noticing my hesitancy, Dalachinsky assumed a leadership role and asks the group how we should proceed. The consensus was that, in spite of the botched flier and the homely garden, we would stick it out and do the concert.

Quietly, the performances began. Francois Grillot and Mariko led off with an improvised duet. Mariko's moves were a combination of ballet, modern and perhaps other dance styles. Grillot bowed free, atonal melodies. Was Mariko reacting through danced movement to Grillot's bass playing, or was it the other way around? During fieldwork, this kind of question had arisen for me before and it would again: how were we in the audience supposed to be evaluating the performance? Even with the hours and hours I'd spent listening to, reading about, and discussing free jazz, some performances struck me as so fundamentally improvisational and so "out" that I didn't know how to listen, or in this case, how to listen and watch. A few times, LES scene participants and I touched upon these questions of interpretation and evaluation, of what one should listen for in avant-jazz and how one could or should judge the aesthetic merits of a given

recording or performance. But these conversations occurred away from performances, usually in the more private spaces of someone's home. In those few moments when scene members and I discussed the possibility that the questions of how to listen well and/or hear avant-jazz properly had no clear answers, we arrived at the speculation carefully. It was as though we had stumbled upon a taboo topic and had to tread lightly, so as not to expose a vast ambiguity lying beneath the apparent cohesion of the avant-jazz scene's "shared creative struggle" (Currie 2011:63).

I remembered that Nader, Patricia Nicholson Parker's assistant at AFA, had told me that, in addition to acting as MC, I should try to get some good photographs of the concert. I pushed the lingering questions and feelings of confusion to the back of my mind, took out my camera, and started shooting...

1.3 A History of Marginality II: Avant-garde jazz

Among practitioners and listeners, the historical complexities of the emergence of avant-garde jazz or the New Thing are often compressed and distilled into a folkloric tale that usually goes something like this: in 1959, saxophonist Ornette Coleman moved to New York, bringing his quartet and their eccentric style of music with him. After playing the melody together, Coleman's group didn't seem to be following any harmonic progressions as the members soloed. Coleman's gigs at the Five Spot Cafe sent shockwaves through the New York jazz world. Meanwhile, New York-based pianist Cecil Taylor was making shockwaves of his own, working on a musical approach that got rid of

discernible meter, functional tonality, and any semblance of the 12- and 32-bar song forms that had been the standard building blocks of form in jazz to that point.

This story's simplicity and hyperbolic rhetoric mark it as myth. It is an allegory focused on two "great men" who acted as twin beacons of radical aesthetic change. Even so, it is anchored by documented facts. Taylor was already moving far outside metric pulse and tonal harmony on his first album, *Jazz Advance*, which appeared in 1956. Taylor used a quartet of saxophone, piano, bass, and drums to record a program that included a couple of 32-bar standards and several blues. In its jittery rhythmic feel, percussive attack, and tenuous relationship to tonality, Taylor's piano playing creates significant tension against the 4/4 swing of the bass and drums. By 1962, Taylor had found the idiom he has explored for the past 50 years: he played only original compositions in which explicit rhythmic meter was completely gone and harmonic organization oscillated between atonality and an idiosyncratic take on pitch centricity, at times suggesting a modal or scalar approach (Taylor 1962).

Coleman's first recording as a leader, *Something Else!!!!* (Coleman 1958), represented a much more subtle stylistic departure from the common practices of the 1950s post-bop mainstream. Coleman employed common quintet ensemble of trumpet, sax, piano, bass and drums to play bop-like melodies anchored to tonal chord progressions ("changes"). Yet the music sounds like slightly off-kilter hard bop. Coleman and trumpeter Don Cherry occasionally veer outside the 12 semitones of equal temperament at unexpected moments. While they adhere to song form in their improvisations, both musicians let themselves digress from the changes from time to

time. On subsequent recordings made in 1959, Coleman's piano-less quartet had achieved the ensemble style that remains one of the sonic icons of "avant-garde jazz" or "free jazz" (Coleman 1960; Coleman 1959). Coleman and Cherry render composed melodies with flexible phrasing and intonation, allowing themselves to slip out of sync and tune with one another. For certain tunes, the rhythm section plays metric time with a bop-derived swing feel; on some tunes, the quartet sustains a rubato feel and abstains from the forward motion of swing played regular meter. The soloist and bassist (Charlie Haden) negotiate harmonic content and modulations to new pitch centers as improvisations unfold; deciding in real time what harmonic fields to explore becomes an important facet of the Coleman Quartet's improvisations.

Coleman and Taylor remain the most visible and canonical musicians in historical narratives of the emergence of the New Thing, even though a slew of other musicians in and around New York, and whose backgrounds were in jazz, were also developing similar experiments in improvisation. David Borgo's inquiry into the various sub-idioms of free improvisation (broadly defined to include the pluralism of avant-garde jazz) takes pains to address the sound-worlds that result from such music-making, but his focus on musicians' various approaches to improvisation brings up an important point: avant-garde jazz placed an even greater emphasis on real-time musical process than the jazz idioms that preceded it in the 1950s and before. While all musicians working in the jazz avant-garde were concerned with what their music *sounded like*, we must keep in mind that certain avant-gardists were less concerned with whether or not their extemporaneous music-making enabled aesthetic pleasure or entertainment from repeated hearings via

sound recordings. To maintain this awareness is to recognize the distinction between two modes of experimentation that musicians of the emergent New Thing pursued: imagining and trying out new ways of *playing* music, and imagining and trying out new *sounds and sonic styles*. Of course these two modes are not mutually exclusive; musicians experimenting with new ways of playing will most likely play sounds and styles they have not previously played, and vice versa. Nor do I think this distinction maps onto the binary of “process” and “product.” We should remember, when listening to, say, a live recording of Albert Ayler’s group, that Ayler’s chief concern was most likely *not* what kind of album would result from the performance he was leading (though he *would*, of course, be concerned with what kind of musical experience his audience was having).

I highlight this distinction because I consider it a necessary background for my inquiry into listening practices within the LES scene. I consider it necessary because recordings are ubiquitous in the everyday lives of LES scene members. Several listeners remarked that while they enjoy witnessing avant-jazz performances as they take place (in live settings), they typically do not find recordings of avant-jazz as fulfilling. Scene musicians, who know from countless hours of hands-on experience that avant-jazz is predicated upon an aesthetics of sound produced in musical interactions and encounters that unfold in real time, often privilege the what they conceive of as the wholeness of the live event over the lesser experience of listening to a recording. Yet the sounds of music recordings issue from their home stereos, their portable devices, and in their memories.⁷

⁷ Philosophical questions regarding the ontology of sound recordings in jazz cultures perennially concern jazz scholarship. Studies that focus on understanding jazz musicians’ creative processes typically view

I could fill pages with an overview of the stylistic changes that emerged in the jazz avant-garde tradition following the early-60s experiments of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and others. But I will forgo such an overview for two reasons. First, such an overview would risk implying a narrative of telos in which successive experiments in musical style represent artistic improvements over previous music.⁸ Second, the extreme stylistic pluralism collated by the labels "avant-garde jazz," "free jazz," "the New Thing," and "avant-jazz" makes an attempt at genre definition through sonic parameters a losing proposition.⁹ Given the prevalence of recordings of jazz in the lives of LES scene listeners, and the more general practice among jazz listeners of citing, discussing, and thinking about music *in terms of* recordings, I survey a selection of recordings that I discussed with LES scene participants during the course of fieldwork. In its reflexive incompleteness, such a survey attends to the ethos of open-ended experimentalism that has mattered to

sound recordings as an important aspect of the circulation and dissemination of jazz cultural production (see, for example, (Ake 2010; Berliner 1994; Monson 1996; Solis 2008). Jed Rasula (Rasula 1995) complicates the epistemological foundations of jazz historiography by calling attention to the axiomatic reliance on recordings as the "primary sources" of music history. In much more recent work, David Grubbs (Grubbs 2014) explores similar questions in his study of 1960s New York-based musical avant-gardism. Grubbs is concerned with exploring how the preservation in sound recordings of experimental musical practices that sought ephemerality changes the aural experience and frames of interpretation of those sounds. Borgo (Borgo 2005), who seeks to explicate the musical processes and aesthetics of free improvisation, challenges the facile dismissal, espoused by many of the non-jazz experimentalists whom Grubbs discusses, of sound recordings as somehow ontologically impoverished. Corroborating Berliner's views of recordings as a pedagogical tool, Borgo writes: "Their disregard for the simple utility of recordings or the sense of tradition that they can and do engender also seems to betray a certain Eurological perspective – one focused on the aesthetic autonomy of the artistic experience devoid of its social implications...From a purely practical standpoint, the exchange of recordings affords an important avenue of social and musical networking, allowing artists and listeners to connect and to build bridges in the dispersed and often marginalized improvised music community. Finally, many performers acknowledge the educational value that recordings can offer through repeated listening" (30-31).

⁸ For a discussion of how jazz historiography often streamlines the events of the past into a forward-moving, linear teleology, see DeVaux (DeVaux 1991).

⁹ Some of the earliest avant-garde jazz criticism thematizes the extreme stylistic diversity within this ostensible "genre" or "school." See, for example, Jost (Jost 1975) and Wilmer (Wilmer 1977).

avant-garde jazz musicians through the decades and brings my overview closer to the aural experiences of my research subjects.¹⁰ Readers can compare my written impressions to their own experience of these recordings, and possibly begin to get a sense of how I hear, too.

"To Composer John Cage" from Anthony Braxton, For Alto (Braxton 2000)

Trombonist Steve Swell waxed enthusiastic as he played me this recording on his home sound system. "So much information!" Steve exclaimed after the track ended. An apt description.

This was Braxton's second recording as a leader. At the time he recorded it, albums of solo saxophone improvisations were virtually unprecedented. Braxton charges into this improvisation at maximum intensity, playing loud, angular melodies. There is no swing feel. His quick inhalations between phrases are audible on the recording, adding to the sound of urgency, as though Braxton were rushing. He's using the entire range of the saxophone and the full chromatic scale. He's not in any key, but neither is he creating a completely atonal musical flow. During the first couple minutes of the track, many of Braxton's melodic gestures begin or land on a honking note low in the alto's register (a concert C#); the repetition of this pitch makes it sound something like a pitch center. Like Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, and other New Thing saxophonists, Braxton explores the

¹⁰ For Benjamin Piekut, perhaps the only characteristic that various strains of musical experimentalism in mid-60s shared was a "restless desire to be elsewhere" (Piekut 2011: 19). Similarly, David Borgo writes that improvisers "revere the uncertainties of new techniques, new conceptions, and new performance occasions, groupings, and venues" (Borgo 2005:14).

limits of his instrument. He squeezes out shrieks at the top of its range; he squeals a downward glissando, a broad smear of sound instead of a melody composed of notes. He juxtaposes dynamic extremes, playing a melodic cell at a whisper and immediately repeating it as a scream. He winds up the piece with a reprise of the angular material of the beginning. He returns to that low C#, using it as the fundamental for a long, hoarse multiphonic.

"Clarity Two" from Wildflowers (rec. 1976) (Wildflowers: The New York Loft Jazz Sessions 2004)

For Yuko Otomo, an important introduction to avant-garde jazz was *Wildflowers*, the multi-disc compilation of performances recorded at Sam Rivers' loft in 1976. Taken as a whole, *Wildflowers* demonstrates the myriad sounds created by musicians who positioned themselves outside the jazz mainstream during the 1970s.

"Clarity Two" is a quartet performance by Michael Jackson on acoustic guitar, Oliver Lake on saxophone and flute, Fred Hopkins on bass, and Phillip Wilson on drums. Jackson composed the tune. He and Lake play the melody in unison while Hopkins bows a bass line. The quartet plays at a ballad tempo, with heavy rubato throughout. Relying heavily on his cymbals, Wilson plays accents and shimmering textures. Harmonically, the tune employs a chord progression to explore several scales. As the performance unfolds, the role of each member of the quartet remains consistent: Lake switches to flute to improvise florid melodies, Jackson provides accompaniment with arpeggiated figures that spell out the chords, Hopkins either bows pedal tones or step-wise bass lines, and Wilson

softly adds a layer of timbral variation and non-metric kinesis. Especially when Lake is on flute, the timbral colors, sparse texture, and modal harmonic language resemble Debussy's late chamber music.

"Fat Man" from the Julius Hemphill Sextet, Fat Man and the Hard Blues (Hemphill 1992)

LES scene members typically speak Julius Hemphill's name with reverence. The composer and saxophonist formed his all-saxophone sextet as a logical extension of the concept behind the World Saxophone Quartet, of which he was a founding member.

Record label owner Steven Joerg called Hemphill's music "heavy" and encouraged me to continue listening to his recordings. Visual artist Jeff Schlanger, who was friends with Hemphill, created the sculpture pictured on the cover for *Fat Man and the Hard Blues*.

The tune opens with the sextet playing a medium-tempo riff with a straight-eighth feel. Harmonically and melodically, the tune is grounded in the blues, but the performance is typical of Hemphill's intertextual musical idiom. Down-home blues phrases are overlaid with polytonal countermelodies. The polished, smooth sound of Duke Ellington's saxophone section coexists with the raunchy growls of rhythm and blues sax honkers. The timbral and textural density intensifies when several saxophonists begin a collective improvisation about 90 seconds into the recording. The polyphony of swaggering bluesy lines, not unlike New Orleans jazz, rides on repetitions of the basic riff of the tune.

"Part A" from Charles Gayle, Touchin' on Trane (Gayle 1993)

Steve Dalachinsky thinks *Touchin' on Trane* might be his favorite of Charles Gayle's recordings. He's listened to Gayle a lot. In 2008, he published a book of poetry written during Gayle performances from 1987 to 2006 (Dalachinsky 2006).

Gayle plays tenor saxophone. His bandmates on the recording are William Parker on bass and Rashied Ali on drums. The album begins with the trio playing up-tempo 4/4 swing. Gayle begins with post-bop style lines in a raspy tone that modulates from thin and dry to full and honking. Similarly, Gayle moves across different styles of melodic phrasing. He plays a nearly diatonic, blues-based post-bop phrase, reminiscent of Ornette. Then he follows with a smear in the tenor's uppermost register, this smear recalling the sounds Albert Ayler and other New Thing saxophonists were developing: heavy vibrato that often pushes the limits of equal temperament, exploring the upper limits of the saxophone's range to produce piercing textures with a vocal quality, elision of discrete notes in favor of directional gestures in pitch space.¹¹ But Ali has a knack for playing drum patterns that imply more than one tempo and meter; this skill is among those that inspired Coltrane to hire Ali in 1965. Parker's bass lines usually describe the fast tempo the trio established at the outset, though he places accents that undermine the metric pulse. As the trio continues their musical flow, each player maintains a flexible relationship to the 4/4 time. The effect is akin to watching three conveyor belts move at

¹¹ Scholars and critics typically mark the beginning of Coltrane's "late period" in mid-1965, when he incorporated elements of Ayler's style into his own playing. See (Porter 1997:262–292) for a thorough and insight analysis of Coltrane's late period.

different and *differing* speeds, falling slightly behind or rushing slightly ahead of one another.

To me, the overall flow and texture of the trio's music in "Part A" deliberately thematizes a quality of "*notquiteness*." The music is in 4/4, but not quite. For several bars at a time, the polyphony of Gayle's and Parker's lines will suggest a tonal chord progression, but then again, not quite. At times, all three players are completely in sync, at other times, not quite.

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Along with their various experiments in sound and improvisatory practice, avant-garde jazz musicians explored alternative ways of presenting their music. These musicians conceived of their aesthetic radicalism as simultaneously modeling a social radicalism. "Free" jazz represented a liberation from many of the established protocols of musical performance, but it also provided a sound world that symbolized a social structure different from the existing class hierarchies and systems of racial discrimination embedded in U.S. political and social life. Avant-garde jazz musicians were fed up with the de facto political economy of jazz performance in New York for the ways it denied them fair compensation in economic and cultural capital. During the 1960s, jazz performances mostly took place in bars and nightclubs; venue owners hired musicians and essentially acted as their employers, determining the final amount of money a musician would receive for a gig. Similarly, jazz musicians were at the mercy of the established bureaucratic and economic structures of the American recording industry when they went into studios to make records (Anderson 2007; Currie 2011; Piekut 2011).

In some ways, it makes more sense to conceive of the history of avant-garde jazz in New York by focusing upon the continuing project of avant-garde jazz musicians to establish institutional structures that would give them control over the presentation and dissemination of their music. Perhaps the earliest example of jazz musicians cutting out the various "middle men" - club owners, record producers, festival promoters, booking agents - and taking the means of production into their own hands was the "Alternate Newport Festival" that Charles Mingus and Max Roach organized in 1960. Held adjacent to the "official" Newport Jazz Festival in Rhode Island, the Mingus-Roach event represented an attempt "to conduct business independently of the music industry's entrepreneurial and promotional framework" (Anderson 2007: 50).

In New York City, the composer and trumpeter Bill Dixon organized and presented a series of concerts he called the October Revolution in Jazz in 1964. Dixon lead a group of New York-based avant-garde jazz musicians in producing a series of performances on their own economic and aesthetic terms. The October Revolution was far more well-attended than Dixon had anticipated, and subsequently received considerable coverage in the jazz press. The event made waves within the New York jazz art world, both because of its surprising success and because the Jazz Composers Guild, the musician-run collective that Dixon and other "Revolution" performers formed in late 1964, folded so quickly after its formation. Within months of its formation, tensions arose from incommensurable conceptions of the Guild's purpose. Dixon envisioned it as the beginning of a system of musical production *outside* the political economy of the music

industry; other members thought of the Guild as a means of leveraging greater power *within* the existing system of club gigs, record labels, and festival performances.¹²

The combination of the Guild's interracial membership and a growing black nationalist consciousness among some of the Guild's African American members proved a crucial obstacle to the group's continued existence. Amiri Baraka, who had been writing in fervent support of "the New Black Jazz" for the past couple years, helped to shape the conception of avant-garde jazz as specifically a music of African American protest. For Bill Dixon, the "Revolution" was *not* black nationalist or Afro-centric, but rather aesthetic and economic. Benjamin Piekut notes that avant-garde jazz musicians grappled with particular conundrums of identity politics that avant-gardists working within the institutional frameworks of (implicitly white European American) concert music, such as John Cage, did not face:

The Jazz Composers Guild's brief history was marked by breaks and conflicts of all kinds...cultural politics, gender, and sexuality, but the salience of race in each of these discourses is noteworthy...Color was not an avoidable issue for the black avant-garde, and the color line marked a sharp edge for experimentalism. Although aesthetic and personal sympathies created connections across the edge, observing the network of the jazz avant-garde shows a social topography quite distinct from that of the European American avant-garde... (Piekut 2011: 139)

In 1972, the Newport Jazz Festival relocated to New York City after a riot at the 1971 Festival motivated the City Council to ban the event from Newport, Rhode Island. Upon learning that they had been passed over for the festival program, several New York-based black musicians organized and began working on countermeasures against what they perceived as the continuing exploitation of black musicians. These musicians

¹² My summary of the October Revolution is drawn from Anderson (2007: 75-92) and Piekut (2011:102-139).

observed that while the Festival would present established black jazz musicians, overall the event allowed black musicians very little input at the organizational level and would place performances beyond the reach, socially and economically, of African American communities in the city. This group drafted a list of demands addressing the above-noted concerns, and sent the list to Festival producer George Wein. When they received no reply, the musicians mounted a counter-festival similar to that produced by Mingus and Roach in 1960 (Heller 2011).

The New York Jazz Musicians' Festival took place in the summer; by September, the same who had organized the counter-festival had formed the New York Musicians Organization (NYMO). The NYMO staged a second festival in 1973, though already the group had lost some of its cohesion. Wein successfully enticed some NYMO members to perform at Newport 1973; internal conflicts began to emerge within the NYMO. By 1976, the NYMO had faded away. However, the organization had inspired several of its members to open music lofts; these musician-run venues became hubs of the so-called "loft jazz scene" that flourished in lower Manhattan during the mid-70s (Heller 2011: 29-39).

Among the musicians who received crucial exposure within the jazz lofts was William Parker. In addition to cutting his musical teeth in the lofts, Parker met his future wife, Patricia Nicholson Parker. Parker began to organize musical events on the Lower East Side in the late '70s. In the early '80s, Parker and fellow bassist Peter Kowald began working on forming a new musicians organization. This work resulted in the Sound Unity Festival of 1984, which was partially funded by a wealthy artist who was Kowald's

friend and an aficionado of avant-garde jazz. Nicholson Parker, Parker, and Kowald presented a second Sound Unity Festival in 1988. In the early 1990s, Patricia Nicholson Parker stepped into the role of collective organizer, founding the Improvisers Collective. As Scott Currie notes, by 1993 Nicholson Parker's experience in organizing and a shared sentiment among Lower East Side experimental artists "helped her pull musicians, dancers, poets and visual artists together, in an effort to encourage cross-fertilization among artists of different disciplines, and provide opportunities for experimentation in composition and improvisation" (Currie 2011: 51).¹³

The Improvisers Collective's emphasis on multi-arts, multimedia collaboration fed directly into Nicholson Parker's next project, the Vision Festival. Essentially the continuing the work of the Improvisers Collective on a larger scale, the first Vision Fest occurred in 1996. Nicholson Parker led the way in founding Arts for Art, Inc. (AFA), a non-profit organization that filed with New York State in 1997. At the current moment (early 2014), AFA continues to present avant-jazz performances including the 18th Vision Festival in 2013 (Currie 2011: 51-63).

1.31 El Jardin III

In 2009, El Jardin del Paraiso held the capacity for multiple connotations. For yuppie transplants, the garden might be part of the landscape of gritty, multicultural "authenticity" that attracted them to the neighborhood. Residents who were around during the 80s might look at any public green space in the neighborhood and recall the

¹³ I have also drawn the rest of my summary of the history of the Sound Unity Festival from Currie (2011).

Tompkins Square Park (Police) Riot of 1988, during which the New York Police Department violently ejected homeless park occupants and activists holding a rally that protested the city's legislative promotion of gentrification. To Puerto Rican residents, its survival may have acted as a mirror of their own resilience, a sign of the permanence of the roots they had put down. For participants in the LES scene who are old enough, the garden, like the buildings and streets around it, might elicit a chain of memories about the neighborhood. Maybe they would be brought back to scenes inside one of the long-gone East Village jazz clubs, such as the Five Spot Cafe, which programmed a wide variety of musicians, including Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman as they made their names during the late 1950s, or Slugs Saloon (which was about one block southeast of El Jardin), where Sun Ra's Arkestra played Monday nights for a couple years during the mid-60s, ESP-Disk recorded Albert Ayler's group in performance, and hard-bop trumpeter Lee Morgan was scandalously murdered, following a domestic dispute with his partner, in 1972. And in this moment of recollection, images of musicians' postures onstage, faded aural traces of their music, and whiffs of smoke and spilled beer might blend together, each sense amplifying the perceptions of the others in the process of excavation so that the stance of a saxophonist looks in the mind's eye like the line he was playing and the twinges of dissonance created by the piano's several out-of-tune keys have everything to do with the acrid smell of cigarettes saturating the room...

Let's return to where I began this chapter: the duet by Rob Brown and Daniel Levin. I made a point to note the appearance of a white man in early middle age with his young daughter. I want to focus on this man briefly. He was dressed casually, but his

clothing indicated, at a minimum, middle-class comfort. After Brown and Levin finished their performance, the man walked up to Dalachinsky and began talking with him. I could hear the man tell Steve that he appreciated this public performance and saw them shake hands. He was a neighborhood resident and a volunteer at the garden.

Was this man, this father, an example of a "hipster," that most despised trope of gentrification in the early 21st century? How can I be sure that this temporary audience member at the "In Gardens" performance qualifies for hipster status? What do I know of this man or his daughter? We spoke not a word to one another. Based upon his retro-style Adidas sneakers, the large tattoo running up his forearm, the flat-topped, military-style cap he wore, and his whiteness, he might be a 2000s-era "hipster."

In bringing the hipster into my discussion, I mean to show that the trope of the hipster bridges the politico-economic history of the Lower East Side and the socio-aesthetic history of jazz in lower Manhattan. The term "hipster" historically operated and continues to operate as an open-ended trope roomy enough to carry several overlapping stereotypes at given points in U.S. history. In addition, the label of "hipster" typically points to specific clothing fashions and other visible elements of style worn on the body.

The early 21st-century hipster and the processes of gentrification with which he is associated was often an indirect or implicit presence in conversations I held during fieldwork. An oblique reference to neighborhood changes brought on by gentrification sometimes implicated the figure of the hipster. The 2009 Vision Festival was held at the Abrons Arts Center, which is on the easternmost portion of Grand St (and hence well south of Houston St). While we volunteered for the Festival, James Keepnews remarked

that “*this* is the *real* Lower East Side, not up by the Local 269. That’s basically the East Village now.” Keepnews was expressing his sense that the area around E Houston St had become gentrified enough to no longer fit the profile of the LES. He was implicitly saying that this area of Grand St, closer to Chinatown and populated by variety of immigrant groups, had stayed truer to the working-class, immigrant history of the LES. Similarly, Steve Dalachinsky once expressed bemusement that so many affluent young people were moving into Brooklyn. Growing up working-class in Brooklyn during the 1950s, “the whole point was to *get out* of Brooklyn!” Steve also remarked on how much the LES had changed since the 1970s, when he first moved to Manhattan. He saw the increasing affluence in certain areas of Brooklyn and lower Manhattan as related signs of a large-scale shift in the political economy of these New York neighborhoods known for their blue-collar histories.

1.4 The Aesthetics of Nonconformity: the Many Lives of the Hipster

...[During the 1950s] jazz culture was the crucial source of the hip aesthetic, although the idiom of 'cool' soon spread far beyond the confines of the jazz world. The figure of the hipster was a kind of cultural putty, to be shaped according to the aims of its handler. *Outside of the consensus view that the hipster was male...few could agree on whether he was suave or icy, sly or clues, black or white or both* (Saul 2003:31, my italics)

The idea of hipness and African American music as cultural critique has, of course, detached itself over the last fifty years from the particular historical context of bebop, circulated internationally; it has inspired several generations of white liberal youth to adopt both the stylistic markers of hipness, which have shifted in response to changes in African American musical and sartorial style, and the socially conscious attitude that hipness has been presumed to signify...In problematizing 'white hipness' I mean to call attention to...the function of African Americans as a symbol of social

conscience, sexual freedom, and resistance to the dominant order in the imagination of liberal white Americans... (Monson 1995:338)

[Hip's] line of demarcation is a shifting frontier of taste that does not always fall along color lines or class lines. Hip is a mobile taste formation that closely registers shifts in respect/disrespect towards popular taste. (Ross 1989:86)

Shortly after World War II, the "hipster" emerged in American popular. Initially, the word identified a subcultural male figure who drew his style from African American culture, and implicitly was black. Though the ideas of "hipness" and "cool," along with their anthropomorphic realization in the hipster, derive from both actual and imagined elements of African American social style, the hipster's racial identity became ambiguous a few years after the word first began to circulate.¹⁴ During the late 1940s, the hipster was ironic, rebellious, and most likely played or avidly listened to jazz. As the reputations of writers such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsburg, and Jack Kerouac rose, the subculture their work both instantiated and depicted grew more visible within American popular culture of the 1950s. These Beat writers provided further variations of the hipster: he could be a white, self-taught intellectual who scorned bourgeois U.S. culture, a voluntary outsider who got high on marijuana or Benzedrine, loved urban African American blues and jazz, and sought to rid himself of the trappings (and structural

¹⁴ See Saul (2003: 31, ff.). Saul posits singer/bandleader Cab Calloway as the earliest practitioner of hipness to bring the trope and its style into popular circulation, in the 1930s. Along the same lines as Monson and Saul, Andrew Ross sees the trope of "hipness" as defined by discourses of racial binarism and continually animated by a white fascination with (partially imagined versions) of black culture and style; Ross refers to the idea of "hip" as a "biracial imaginary" (Ross 1989: 101).

privileges) of mainstream American whiteness through his embrace of social and aesthetic fringes.¹⁵

By the early 1960s, the trope of the hipster had become more well-known within the mainstream of American culture, and therefore the figure loosened his ties to the jazz world. Around the same time, the term "hippie" - a derivation of "hipster" - began to circulate. Among jazz musicians, "hippie" was a derisive label for a person who performed a superficial hipness without sincerely appreciating the complexities of post-bop jazz or truly believing the left-wing political views he might propound. Black jazz musicians considered the "hippie" a fake, someone who was all style with no substance (Saul 2003: 82-89).

As the '60s progressed, the Beat movement gradually metamorphosed into the hippies of the white counterculture. While the Beats shared an admiration of jazz, hippie subculture embraced the experimental rock music that flourished in the San Francisco Bay area and Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side in New York. Scott Saul considers the ideological and aesthetic shifts of Sam Shepard and John Sinclair from jazz to rock, offering the two cultural producers as emblematic of the broader shift in the largely white hippie subculture. Shepard began the '60s as a playwright who explicitly cited jazz music as an aesthetic model. By the late '60s, Shepard claimed rock as his primary musical inspiration. Sinclair, who published books of poems paying tribute to jazz musicians in the mid-60s, came to hear the same kind of insurrectionary energy in

¹⁵ My sketch of the hipster is a composite from the commentaries on "hipness" and the "hipster" by Ross (1989: 65-101), Monson (1995), and Saul (2003: 29-60).

the hard rock coming out of his native Detroit as he did in avant-garde jazz. Sinclair became the manager of the MC5, a Detroit rock band who themselves appropriated elements of Black Nationalist rhetoric in their performances. Soon after, Sinclair founded the White Panther Party in 1968. He defined the Party as the hippie's counterpart to the Black Panther Party, though it was largely a publicity stunt. He treated the Black Power movement as an ensemble of ethos, style, and rhetoric, from which he could choose elements to create his personalized version of hippie politics and culture (Saul 2003: 271-301).

1960s rock still owed much of its sonic style to black rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues, but the hippie counterculture had moved the notions of "hip" and "cool" quite far from jazz. A kind of sequel to the Beat generation, the hippie movement dissipated in U.S. popular culture during the first half of the 1970s. The trope of the "hipster" faded from popular usage during most of the '70s, all of the '80s, and roughly the first half of the '90s (Arsel and Thompson 2011).

Then in the second half of the 1990s, the word "hipster" started to appear in popular music journalism. Rock critics such as Robert Christgau began to identify listeners who deliberately sought out anti-mainstream indie rock as "hipsters." As the word continued to circulate within the contexts of rock criticism and popular-cultural journalism, the millennial version of the "hipster" continued to be refined. The word increasingly connoted a young, affluent and implicitly white demographic defined by its consumption patterns: "While the 1950s hipster had been represented as a countercultural iconoclast who defied the consumerist norms of middle-class culture, the

millennial hipster increasingly came to be represented as an überconsumer of trends and as a new, and rather gullible, target market that consumes cool rather than creating it" (Arsel and Thompson 2011: 796).

Though a minority of affluent urban dwellers might embrace the label of "hipster," the current-day usage of the term is overwhelmingly one of disgust, ridicule, or derision. To call someone else a "hipster" is generally a gesture of abjection. As the quote from Arsel and Thompson above implies, "hipster" has become nearly synonymous with "yuppie." The chief difference is most commentators see the hipster as someone who denies, deliberately or unconsciously, his socioeconomic privilege, and the yuppie typically takes pride in the same.

The hipster of the late 1990s and 2000s enjoys the privilege of assembling style through a bricolage of earlier incarnations of cool and expressions of nonconformism, drawing from the sartorial signifiers of 1970s punk, 1950s Beat, 1990s grunge, etc. In a 2008 column for the *Huffington Post*, Julia Plevin describes identifies some of the stereotypical attributes of the hipster, while humorously denying that she herself is a hipster. Plevin's descriptions corroborate the account that Arsel and Thompson give:

I shop at American Apparel, have an Apple computer, avoid Starbucks and other corporate conglomerate coffee, smoothie, and frozen yogurt places, and consider myself "unique," but I assure you I'm not a hipster...
I have met twentysomethings who are "geniuses" at the Apple Store in San Francisco, attend concerts in empty pools in Brooklyn, and wear tight jeans and converse sneakers, but I've never met anyone one who describes themselves as "hipster"...
Hipsters are supposed to hate anything mainstream or trendy. But the look has gone mainstream -- tweens all over America, from the suburbs to cities, from public schools to prep schools are trying hard to be hipsters. There are definitely hipster, or hipster imposters, who roam the streets of New York City with that iconic carefully created sloppy vintage look. Would the real hipsters argue that these imposters just have the look but not the right values? (Plevin 2008)

The result of a roundtable panel held at the New School for Social Research, *What Was the Hipster?: a Sociological Investigation* (2010) provides one of the most thorough examinations of the multiple meanings and associations the word "hipster" elicits in the early 21st century. A selection of definitions by the various writers collected in the volume can help us further understand what is at stake when the charge of "hipster" is leveled.

Mark Greif describes the late-90s/early-00s hipster thus:

the source of a priori knowledge seemed to be an only partly nostalgic suburban whiteness, the 1970s culture of white flight from the cities to the suburbs...As the "White Negro" had once fetishized blackness, the "white hipster" fetishized the violence, instinctiveness, and rebelliousness of lower-middle-class suburban or country whites (Greif, Ross, and Tortorici 2010)

Greif also links the trope of the hipster to "the return of rich whites to big cities in the '90s and '00s and, with it, the suburbanization of poverty" (149). He specifically cites the influx of young, affluent, whites into the Lower East Side during the late 1990s that displaced working-class Jews and Puerto Ricans who had called the neighborhood home for decades.

Some of Greif's interlocutors further explore the underlying motivations when people deploy "hipster" as a term of abjection. Jace Clayton asks: "What are we not talking about when we're talking about the hipster? For example, criticizing the hipster is often a way of discussing gentrification and neighborhood change – while exempting oneself from the process" (Greif, et al. 2010: 29). Similarly, in a written response to the roundtable, Jennifer Baumgardner writes: "Those who sneer at hipsters often belong to the hipster's social class. Using myself as an example, I was a gentrifier in

Williamsburg...Hipster hating speaks to our own fears and inadequacies more than it says anything real about real people" (94-95).

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Was the father wearing the yellow shirt, military cap, and the Adidas a hipster?

Almost certainly, he belonged to the upper-class, white population that helped to gentrify the East Village and other U.S. urban neighborhoods at the turn of the century.

According to most recent accounts of the 21st-century hipster, this attribute alone qualifies him. Moreover, here he was, consuming a stylized figuration of authenticity, made possible by the various connotations of resistance and cultural difference that the community gardens still hold.

Just as the Lower East Side transformed into an increasingly affluent neighborhood, the figure of the hipster experienced a form of gentrification during the late 20th century. He moved from the actual margins of American popular culture toward the mainstream. Much like Mele's description of the East Village of the 1990s, the current-day hipster represents a contrived stylization of nonconformity. As the hipster achieved upward mobility, he discarded his mid-20th century allegiance to jazz. Why? Because jazz, too, had undergone a kind of gentrification. While jazz achieved moderate commercial success in the American music industry during the 1950s, in the following decade it began to move toward its current position as an art music primarily supported by educational and philanthropic institutions. As Iain Anderson notes, the irony of the New Thing was that, while its practitioners sought to bring their music to a wide

audience, including the African-American working class, avant-garde jazz appealed mostly to a small, highly-educated audience of white college students, artists, and black intellectuals (Anderson 2007: 122-152).

AFA wants to construe avant-jazz as a music of "the people" (in the 1960s leftist sense of the term) and present it to "the people" of the Lower East Side. The problem is that many listeners have long thought of jazz as an art music and working-class folk grow increasingly scarce in the Lower East Side. In addition, the organization's own definition of "avant-jazz" is so inclusive that it challenges the notion of genre:

Avantjazz is art that exhibits a disciplined disregard for traditional boundaries. While avantjazz is an outgrowth of African American musical forms, e.g. blues and jazz, it has made a break from the strict adherence to traditional forms. Avantjazz draws freely from any musical tradition in creating structures and frameworks for improvisation. It is also free to disregard musical conventions, as the artist sees fit. For example, the avantjazz musician has the creative freedom to incorporate music of Asian or African cultures, or may do away with conventional song forms or rhythmic structures. Some avantjazz artists focus on the blues in their work, while others refer to 20th century atonalism. But these tendencies are not true of all of their music. That is their freedom. It is not a freedom from melody or composition or rhythm. It is the freedom to choose any musical tradition or vocabulary as part of their palette. This aesthetic extends to all art forms presented by Arts for Art, as we inspire and help evolve art and thinking. (<http://artsforart.org/about/mission>)

Yet within this ecumenical description lies the important claim of African American cultural heritage. The avant-jazz could *sound like* almost anything, but its ethos comes from the continuum of black music in the U.S. Reminding the reader of avant-jazz's spiritual roots in African American music, AFA reclaims the aesthetic and political values that avant-garde jazz musicians espoused during the long 1960s.

Through the "In Gardens" series, the RUCMA series, and the Vision Fest, AFA works to maintain the musical tradition of avant-jazz. Moreover, AFA seeks to keep

avant-jazz alive in its reputed birthplace on the Lower East Side. By linking avant-jazz to the Lower East Side, AFA reclaims the neighborhood's past as a site of African American cultural production, experimentalism across multiple arts, and proletarian self-determination. Ironically, figuring avant-jazz as music of the Lower East Side also helps to consolidate the wild variety of musical idioms into something like a genre. Part of the work that the Vision Festival does, beyond providing platforms for avant-jazz, is providing the sense of a unified "vision." AFA merges the diverse agendas – aesthetic and political – of avant-jazz musicians in an official discourse that links the ecumenical, esoteric aesthetics and musical ethos of avant-garde jazz with the populist, grassroots community-building political ethos of homesteaders and squatters in the LES.

"The Lower East Side," "avant-jazz," and "the hipster" – over decades of circulation, these signs have become noisy. The overlapping and conflicting meanings carried by each sign create the noise.¹⁶ The semiotic noisiness of avant-jazz (high-brow experimental aesthetics vs. populist radical politics, spirituality that transcends cultural difference vs. expression of a specific culture and its history) manifests in the "noisy" sonic qualities of the music. Or is it the other way around? The textural density, timbral variety, harmonic dissonance, and rhythmic ambiguity of avant-jazz can make the music difficult to interpret. "So much information!" as Steve Swell said of Anthony Braxton's saxophone solo. Even amidst the noise thrown off by the concepts of "Lower East Side,"

¹⁶ Here I am drawing from David Novak's theorization of culture as constituted *through* circulation: "People discover other meanings in culture as it unravels, disconnects, and folds in on itself" (Novak 2013:19).

"avant-jazz" and the history of "hipness," the simultaneous and competing messages in each may align briefly to create a special moment of music.

1.5 El Jardin: Reprise

The last performance of the concert is scheduled to begin at 4:00pm. At about 4:10, the musicians slotted to play have not yet arrived. The Bergers and Steve Dalachinsky become antsy. They want to head over to another garden where trumpeter Roy Campbell will be leading a set. Dalachinsky borrows my phone and calls Nader to find out about Campbell's set. It turns out Campbell is also running late. Then our musicians begin to arrive and begin to set up. Roberta has left in search of Roy Campbell's location. I get the call from Nader and tell Steve and Richard that Campbell has arrived at his garden. A few moments later Richard is talking on his cell; apparently Roberta can't find the garden where Roy's playing.

The last performance begins just after 4:30pm. It's a quartet of trumpet, sax, bass and drums. If there is a "standard" instrumental ensemble in avant-jazz, this is it. Ever since Ornette Coleman's quartet hit the Lower East Side in the late 1950s, musicians working in freer and more "out" idioms have explored countless ways of configuring music for horns, bass and drums. Today, Brian Groder plays trumpet; Richard Keene handles saxophone duties on the tenor; Lisle Ellis provides the bass; and the nominal leader Jackson Krall sits at the drum kit.

Within moments, Richard gets sucked in and decides not to leave just yet. As they continue to play, Richard continues to listen. "I can't pull myself away; it's too good. Every

time I figure I'll go I get more interested in this!" I agree with him that the quartet sounds great. Involuntarily and almost unconsciously I think of the spry, pianoless passages on Miles Davis' 1966 recording of "Footprints" (Davis 1967), of Sam Rivers' *Dimensions and Extensions* record (Rivers 1986). I have other associations, other momentary aural recollections. Groder and Keene are producing strong, rich tone with their brass horns. With fleet technique they play melodies that dance in and out of harmonic centers. Krall finds a huge variety of sounds on a sparse, portable drum kit. Sweat drips from Ellis' chin and a pleased grimace of concentration plays upon his face as he vigorously strums the strings of his bass. None of them seem to care now that they had to search for the garden, start late, play under strained conditions.

After standing and listening to the music for about 20 minutes, snapping the occasional photo with a small digital camera, I feel a kind of lightness in the chest, a tingling on the skin, a quickening of the heart. A general sense of inspiration in the literal sense: breath entering and fortifying my body. I have been moved by the music, energized, my anxiety about the ambiguity of my role as "volunteer" for this event fades away, and I get more into the music. I think again of how Richard has been pulled in.

A woman – Latina, probably late 30s – comes into the garden slowly, observes the musicians and those of us standing and sitting around, listening. She stands behind Krall. Looking at her, I get the feeling that she has come to relax a bit in the garden. She initially looked as if she would move on to the other end of the garden, but she ends up lingering near us. Minutes pass, and she begins to move a bit. A small smile plays around her mouth during a solo Krall takes. She likes his snappy, lickety-split drumming.

A thought comes to me, and with it the immediate afterthought that it is sentimental and trite: in spite of all of the organizational miscommunications, the noisy discombobulation that plagued this event, AFA achieved what it sought, even if only with this one woman. Someone heard this music without expectations, was drawn in, and then *heard* the music.

Then I start to think about roughness. I think about the messiness of the planning for the garden concerts. The density and "grainy" texture of so many typical and now-classic sounds of avant-jazz: the heterophonic hubbub of Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry playing the heads of tunes; the hard-edged, steely tone that Cecil Taylor's percussive attack creates on the piano, the skittering hyperactivity of his figures; the variously woolly, reedy, or metallic sound of Albert Ayler's saxophone. I think of the scruffiness of the garden itself and how this concert still happened.

As Richard said hours ago, "We'll improvise!" It now occurs to me that though he was being reflexively corny, he was also presenting an iconic version of the ethos on display this afternoon. Given the poor planning and subpar circumstances, we'll improvise with this situation. In a musical sense "we" (though Richard of course meant the musicians, he ambiguously included himself in using the first-person plural pronoun) will improvise music. The musicians will play musical sounds without discussing beforehand what they will be and how they will fit together – they'll have to continually figure that out as they go along.

The trope about jazz interaction being a model of social structure – an aesthetic, ritualized form of how people might relate to one another – feels real and makes intuitive

sense to me, as though I were understanding it for the first time. What's in avant-jazz for those who like it? What's the big deal? And why do so few people like it? Why do many non-LES scene jazz listeners (including many jazz fans I know) find it abrasive and unnerving? It occurred to me that I should just as well ask: what do people seek from social interactions? What many people want out of music is "comfort": musical sounds that fit together perfectly - consonant harmonies with a system of rules, rhythms that fit with one another, a sonic framework with a knowable, regular rule set. People might want the same kind of predictability and regularity to figure in their interpersonal relationships. The messiness, looseness, rough-hewn quality that often prevails in avant-jazz is forbidding to most. Ambiguity in social situations, not knowing how to act, what to think, what to do - this upsets people, makes them nervous (as I had been for much of the afternoon, the "volunteer" who didn't have a sense of his duties). And what Dalachinsky, Richard Berger, the musicians, Yuko all shared was the idea, the feeling that they should just go ahead. Jump in. Don't quit. Just keep afloat. Why not? The musicians came to play; the conditions weren't great. They still played.

After the quartet finishes, people begin to pack up. Some introduce themselves to each other; some hang around chewing the fat. A stout Latino walking his small dog approaches Keene, the saxophonist. He puts out his hand, shakes heartily. I make out "Man, that was wonderful..." or something of the sort. I watch as Keene and the dog walker chat for a bit longer, smiling. The woman I observed earlier smiles at Krall, complimenting him.

Albey is leaving the garden.

“Well, Matthew, it came out okay!

“Yeah.

–even though it was looking pretty grim for a while there.”

Yeah, it did. It came out really well.”

Chapter 2

“There’s No Home for This Music”: Venues and the Marginalization of Jazz in the U.S. Culture Industry

2.1 Introduction

21 December 2009 - The Local 269, E Houston St

Veterans of the LES avant-jazz scene are playing tonight: Herb Robertson on trumpet; Tim Berne on saxophone; Steve Swell on trombone; Ed Schuller on bass; Jay Rosen on drums. The cold of this winter night seems to have diminished the turnout of LES scene participants, but there is still a fair showing for this first set of the evening: Roberta and Richard Berger; Brad Farberman (working the door as well as listening); saxophonist Ras Moshe; the fanatical listeners Kevin and Scott; Ed Schuller’s brother, George (also a musician); and me. We listen quietly during the performance, engrossed by the music. During soft passages in the music, the quietude in the bar becomes almost tangible, something you could reach out and touch.

There are hardly any customers beyond the light-drinking RUCMA series listeners, perhaps two or three people drinking at the bar. The bartender, Mike, appears to be in his 30s; he wears thick-rimmed glasses and sports a shaved head. On Monday nights we used to see one of the owners - a married couple named Phil and Claire - keeping bar. More and more often, Mike has replaced them for the Monday night RUCMA/AFA shift. Mike speaks to a customer at the bar, loudly. His voice cuts through the meditative sounds coming from the bandstand. “*Shhh!*” The exhortation issues from

somewhere among the tables, snapping back at the bartender's indiscretion. After a few more seconds of speaking at his previous volume, Mike lowers his voice.

Later in the set, Ed Schuller plays an unaccompanied passage on bass. The sonic stillness once again becomes something palpable. Then the bartender pipes up again. He talks to a customer, seemingly unaware that his voice drowns out the music.

22 February 2010 – The Local 269

Tonight the Local 269 holds a good number of LES scene listeners, some of whom are also regular performers in the Monday night series. Nader works the door; he took over this duty after Brad Farberman requested that he be relieved from the job in order to concentrate on curating and booking the RUCMA series. A couple walks through the entrance and does not make contact with Nader; he asks his obligatory question: "Are you here for the music?" I watch from a few feet away and cannot hear the brief exchange that follows Nader's question. At the end of this exchange, the couple exits the bar. Mike, the bartender, has been watching this encounter. Quickly, he walks over to Nader from behind the bar.

"Hey, did you tell those people they had to pay a cover?" There is a steely edge to Mike's voice. Nader begins to explain himself softly; I can't make out his words. "You can't do that. *Don't* do that again. If people come here to drink you've got to let them." The bartender has several inches on Nader and looms over him as he reprimands. After the low-volume, high-tension altercation, Nader shifts his weight from one foot to the

other, looks around nervously. Patricia, who has watched the interaction, comes up to Nader and speaks with him in quiet, consoling tones.

I pull my attention back to the musical performance. On the bandstand at the other end of the room, Steve Swell and his quartet are *cooking*.

Steve Dalachinsky leans over to Nader and murmurs some encouragement, something like, “Don’t worry about it, you were just doing what you’re supposed to do.” Leaning in towards one another, Steve and I chat a bit about how the vibe in 269 has felt increasingly hostile towards the RUCMA series and the avant-jazz crowd. Steve comments, “Like Atticus said, why don’t they calm down, they’ve got a whole room full of people and most of them have drinks!” Atticus is a friend of Steve’s – not a regular attendee of avant-jazz gigs, but a face I’ve seen before.

“I know,” I say, and looking towards Atticus, I continue, “that’s not all.” I note that after maintaining a price of \$5 per draft beer for nearly a year, the bar raised the price to \$6 a couple months back, and recently raised it again to \$7. I speculate that perhaps the higher prices are only in effect on RUCMA nights, both as an act of passive aggression towards this music series that the bar proprietors appear to have grown to resent, and as a strategy for encouraging low alcohol sales during RUCMA events. Bad business on RUCMA nights would give the bar owners leverage in arguing that the series is hurting the bar economically, leading to conclusion that, for the sake of their business, the Local 269 must stop hosting the RUCMA series.

Dalachinsky doesn’t think this is out of the realm of possibility.

2.11 Bad Vibes

During both of these moments, intersubjective tensions arose from conflicting ideas of how the Local 269's social space was to be used. The form these tensions took on were small, even minute, communicative gestures – an inflection of voice, a facial expression, a quick exchange of words. The tensions themselves, however, arise from much longer social histories. The first moment illustrates a genre-specific mode of public listening: the quiet concentration of the jazz aficionado. The second moment's tension hinges upon an apparent conflict of interests between two sets of actors: bar proprietors, whose primary goal was making money through the sale of alcohol, versus jazz-scene participants, whose primary goal was the collective creation of a music performance.

I begin this chapter with these two moments because I believe they represent, in microcosm, a history of discord between jazz and a type of space that has played an important role in its public practice and circulation. LES scene members show their awareness of this history by reproducing and circulating a trope with its own long history in jazz: the assertion that jazz is either in trouble, dying, or already dead. They see the avant-jazz scene's perennial struggles to find stable venues as key evidence of the trouble that the genre faces. They share stories about the scene's precarious subsistence in New York: The existence of record labels that specialize in non-mainstream jazz is nice, and it's great that William Parker, Matthew Shipp and others can get gigs in Europe and Japan. But that's not the same as avant-jazz thriving in New York, its hometown. The music needs New York performance spaces it can count on, where avant-jazz musicians

can play to sympathetic audiences without worrying about whether the music is driving away bar customers.

Chapter 1 began outdoors, at a single performance, in order to consider how LES scene members associate avant-jazz with neighborhood histories. This chapter moves indoors to look at and listen inside some of the primary performance venues in which the LES scene congregated, made music, and listened to itself around 2009 and 2010. The bulk of this chapter concerns itself with detailed descriptions of the clubs and venues that were key in my fieldwork. In Chapter 1, I argued that the related histories of a neighborhood and a musical genre inform LES scene participants' acoustemologies, listening practices, and interpretive processes. This chapter extends that line of thinking to argue that smaller microgeographies – those within music venues – similarly affect the processes of listening to, creating meaning from and around, and performing music. In developing this argument, I draw upon scholarship that attends to the cultural politics of *vibe* creation in music venues and other social sites of music listening.¹

¹ Harris Berger's detailed description of four music venues in Ohio is an important model for my work in this chapter (1999:35–116). Among the features he notes are: the physical shape, arrangement of stages and seating, lighting, and acoustics of performance spaces; typical demographics and clothing style of audiences; presentation and performance styles of musicians. David Grazian's work on Chicago blues clubs includes extended discussion of the multiple forces at working in creating an atmosphere of a commoditized authentic blackness, such as venue décor, staff behavior, musicians' performances of music and personae, and the behavior of audiences and bar regulars (Grazian 2003 particularly Chs. 1-3). See Taylor Atkins (2001) and David Novak (2013:92–116) for analyses of etiquettes of social listening and in Japanese *jazu-kissa* (jazz coffeehouses). Small but dedicated networks of connoisseurs frequented these venues to listen to imported jazz recordings in the company of other aficionados. Silent listening became a hallmark practice in the *kissa*. The practice enabled intense concentration on musical details while providing a means by which jazz connoisseurs could externalize their listening.

With regard to the geography of music scenes, Novak's (2013) account of Noise provides an illuminating contrast to this chapter. Though Noise practitioners' and listeners' investments in the idea of social-aesthetic musical fringes bears resemblance to the embrace of marginality within the LES scene, Novak points out the difficulty of mapping out the geography of Noise venues in Japan. Novak often found that

The sense of place that a music venue projects to a visitor – atmosphere, ambience, *vibe* – is determined by the choices of socially-positioned agents (venue managers, performers, landlords, musicians, audience members, et al.). This socially constructed and mediated *vibe* shapes the musical sounds, verbal interactions and other social relations that take place within the venue. In turn, these forms of sociality allow and encourage certain modes of listening while discouraging or prohibiting others. A venue's external and internal decor, the way space is defined through seating arrangements, the level of lighting for both performers and audience, the presence of soundproofing, admission charges, the presence, cost, and quality of drinks and/or food – all communicate and represent specific choices on the part of managers and proprietors. When avant-jazz musicians, either through preference or mere opportunity, choose repeatedly to perform at a specific venue, they tacitly agree to work within and reproduce a venue's *vibe*.²

Before we explore the venues and their vibes, I must further explain the history of incompatibility between jazz and the bars and nightclubs that have often hosted its performances. With a sense of this history, we then are better equipped to interpret the multiple valences contained in the statements, “jazz is in trouble” or “jazz is dead.”

Noise participants often suggested he visit record stores, as opposed to live performance venues, in order to better understand Noise as a genre. He notes the transience of many Noise performance venues along with practitioners' lack of affective attachment to venues (65-90). Ellen Gray's study of Portuguese fado analyzes the social production of venue vibes. In its valorization of specific venues, the fado scene in Lisbon bears more resemblance to the LES scene (Gray 2013:105-138).

² Paul Berliner (1994:449–473) provides an overview of the variables that contribute to the venue's “vibe”: room acoustics, room size, available audio equipment, management policy, typical clientele, audience behavior, et al. See also Travis Jackson (2012:52–69) for a discussion of the geography of mainstream jazz venues in New York during the 1990s. Jackson theorizes the social dynamics of space in a manner similar to my discussion here.

2.2 Silent Listening, “Noisy” Music

Scholars typically point to the bebop movement as the moment when a critical mass of jazz musicians defined themselves and were received by listeners as artists rather than as entertainers.³ As bebop emerged, an aficionado audience began to define itself against audiences who valued jazz as “mere” entertainment: certain members of jazz audiences in New York began to externalize their seriousness of purpose by listening to jazz performances in disciplined silence. The differentiation of this connoisseur audience was in part enabled by critics such as Leonard Feather, who contrasted these “hepcats” with audience members who merely came to dance.⁴

Shifts in audience etiquette occurred alongside and in dialogue with shifts in the status of jazz music within hegemonic hierarchies of cultural production in the U.S. In some ways, the project of 1960s avant-garde jazz musicians to achieve aesthetic and economic self-determination in many ways echoed the aspirations of beboppers during the 1940s. Avant-garde jazz musicians wanted audiences to treat their music with the same level of respect granted to European-derived art music.⁵ The practice of quiet listening (with the exception of audible applause to mark one’s appreciation of musical

³ Scott DeVeaux (1999) provides the most thorough history of the aesthetic and ideological shifts that constituted “bebop.” Notably, DeVeaux continually debunks the assumption that bebop musicians viewed rigorous aesthetics and artistic integrity as necessarily opposed to commercial viability (16, *passim*).

⁴ See (Burke 2008:128–130; DeVeaux 1999:277–279). Note that Feather’s identification of “hepcats” coincides represents a clear example of how the related terms “hepcat” and “hipster” bore positive and even meritorious connotations in their nascent periods (see Chapter 1).

⁵ See Anderson (2007). Amiri Baraka, whose writing and organizational activities played an important role in shaping notions of “the New Thing,” interpreted bebop as a revolutionary, Black Nationalist expressive form, and construed the New Thing as the true aesthetic and ideological continuation of bebop (after the fallow period of Hard Bop during the 1950s) (see Baraka 1967:81–94).

excellence, both during and after a musical performance) is the LES scene's legacy from earlier periods in jazz history, as well as from the audience practices of other genres and scenes of experimental and avant-garde music.⁶

The quiet volume of the musical performance on the evening of December 21st exposed the bartender's neglect of the silent listening etiquette. Certain performances in the Local 269 maintained a volume high enough to drown out talk that was louder than the bartender's. During those performances, the bar's occupants could violate the etiquette of silent listening – at times even avant-jazz participants violated it. On December 21st, the bar's acoustic space became contested territory because avant-jazz participants felt that extraneous noise limited the aesthetic integrity of the performance at hand: they felt that the musicians should have been able to exploit the entire range of dynamics, including the most delicate *pianissimo*.

I also consider the contestations around the acoustic space of the 269 to be a specifically *urban* phenomenon, shaped by New York City's dense geography and its concomitant intensity of sound. The spread of mechanical technologies and increases in population density meant that major metropolises like New York and London experienced a dramatic increase in *sound* during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While these cities became more crowded with people, some of those people felt increasingly cramped by a barrage of sounds, many of which they considered “noise.” To

⁶ For an example of an important precedent in the typical practice of silent audiences during Western art music, see James Johnson (Johnson 1995 *passim*), who traces the shift to quiet audiences in the concert world of early 19th-century Paris. Christopher Small (Small 1998) provides a description and critique of typical 20th-century audience etiquette in the Western art music tradition.

classify sounds as “noise” means drawing distinctions between sounds that are permissible (or desirable) and those that are undesirable. This act of classification is especially fraught with power in urban areas.⁷ While many early 21st-century New York residents may cherish moments of quiet that provide aural respite from the sounds of the city, greater amounts of social and economic capital facilitate the creation and inhabitation of “noise-free” environments.⁸

Jazz has continually sounded throughout New York City since the early 20th century. Yet its sonic ubiquity has often rested upon fragile socioeconomic ground. Like other musical styles and genres developed primarily by African Americans, jazz has had to vie for a comfortable spot in the U.S. musical imaginary. Jazz musicians have struggled

⁷ Michael Bull (Bull 2007:3) provides a discussion of the history of how urban sounds came to be considered “noise” in 19th-century London. The process was specifically political and inflected by class difference. Affluent Londoners sought to contain the city sounds they considered undesirable: the sounds of factories, of industrial labor, etc. Similarly, Emily Thompson shows that the increasing prevalence of new technologies in early 20th-century U.S. cities lead to debates about the merits or ills of mechanized urban sounds, as well as the emergence of strategies for noise abatement. The failure of New York City’s “Noise Abatement Commission” to find methods for controlling sound in public spaces, spurred on the development of an industry of sound-proofing and sound-engineering interior spaces to block out external, unwanted sounds (Thompson 2002). “Quiet” became “a private commodity, available for purchase by anyone who could afford it” (Thompson 2002: 6). These histories reveal the inception of “noise pollution” as a discourse of power.

⁸ New York City residents are not strangers to debates about noise pollution. Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani made “quality of life” improvements a signature of his administration. “Quality of life” violations and crimes included littering in public areas, reckless bicycle riding, and noise pollution. “Noise pollution” could mean excessive car horn honking, engine noise from commercial vehicles, rowdy verbalization from inebriated pedestrians, uncontained sound from music clubs and venues. In 1994, the city specifically focused a crackdown on the neighborhood of Greenwich Village, a common destination for nocturnal socializing, but significantly a neighborhood with a good number of wealthy residents. In 2002, then-current mayor Michael Bloomberg launched “Operation Silent Night,” a noise pollution enforcement plan that targeted 24 neighborhoods throughout the city (Steinhauer 2002).

My thinking on acoustics in urban space is also informed by Ralph Ellison’s essay, “Living with Music” (Ellison and Callahan 1995). In this essay Ellison describes a power struggle that arose around sound in domestic space. The urban soundscape of New York City inevitably meant that Ellison’s apartment would be filled with sounds he did not particularly want to hear. When the “noises” of a neighbor, a classically-trained vocalist, became too much for Ellison to endure, he fought back. Ellison fought noise with noise, blowing his trumpet in reply to the singer’s vocal exercises and practice.

for fair compensation and battled against pejorative conceptions of their music grounded in hegemonic, racist stereotypes about African American sociality and cultural production. Certain styles of jazz, have gained the praise and funding of dominant institutions of culture (with a capital C), such as nonprofit performing arts centers, universities, and public broadcasting media.⁹ Still, many musicians who work within and around strains of the jazz tradition continue to do so under the constant threat of having their music classified as “noise” (whether or not the word is explicitly applied as a label).¹⁰ They must also deal with the economic and legal controls that result from such a classification.

It may seem odd that I am making a link between the politics of audience etiquette (inflected by jazz participants’ wish to obtain greater cultural capital) and the politics of urban noise regulations (which have been shaped by and for dominant classes). I do so because I see the two political histories conflated in the moments of tension I witnessed in the Local 269. When the staff of the 269 considered avant-jazz to be an obstacle to alcohol sales and profit, the staff treated the music as ambient *noise*.

⁹ Lincoln Center’s launch in 1991 of a permanent jazz program has become an iconic example of jazz’s entry into the realm of elite culture. See below, I discuss this in greater detail near the end of this chapter.

¹⁰ During the early 20th century, critics of jazz decried what they perceived as the music’s noisiness. For these critics, jazz was especially undesirable because it indexed both the savagery of black America and the dehumanizing effects of technology (Thompson 2002:130–132). More broadly, Jacques Attali (1985) theorized a dialectical history of musical styles in which emerging musical styles, initially condemned as “noise” by agents of cultural hegemony, gradually gain acceptance as “music” and enter into the hegemonic realm of the mainstream. With this acceptance, the style loses its transgressive power. Writing in the 1970s, Attali’s arguments bore distinct traces of the insurrectionary spirit of the French Spring of 1968. Ironically, he believed free jazz was one of the musical styles capable of spurring on the Marxian revolution that would overthrow capitalism.

Paul Chevigny, a longtime jazz aficionado and human rights lawyer, gives a trenchant account of the “cabaret laws” that the New York Police Department enforced for decades. Implemented in 1926, laws required that any venue featuring music, dancing, or anything else considered “entertainment” hold a cabaret license. As Chevigny notes: “The cabaret laws were principally of symbolic value to those who enforced them; they expressed the view of the New York City lawmakers—rooted ultimately in racism as well as fear of bohemian mores—that vernacular music was not entitled to be treated with respect” (Chevigny 2005:4).

In 1940 the city decided to increase its control over the activities of jazz musicians and the nightclubs in which they worked by requiring all employees of so-called “cabarets” to be fingerprinted and carry personal identification cards, usually called “cabaret cards.” The police department oversaw this protocol until 1967, when the cabaret card requirement was dropped during Mayor John Lindsay’s effort to New York City’s nightlife (57, 67). Cabaret cards and laws were a way for the City to exercise social control over individuals, lifestyles, and cultural practices it considered immoral or unrespectable. But this control manifested itself in both economic and ideological dimensions: without cabaret cards, jazz musicians could not work in nightclubs and thus their means of subsistence were challenged. Chevigny also theorizes a link between the aesthetic marginality of the music and the social marginality of the musicians:

To play jazz was to be a musical outsider, even sometimes a revolutionary, to cut against the grain of ordinary musical taste. The City’s rules governing the lives of musicians, together with the nature of the places where the music was played, only exemplified, indeed legislated, that status. And many musicians lived the status, making it a part of them. (Chevigny 2005: 61)

The cabaret laws were not the only methods used to marginalize jazz musicians and their cultural production. The question of where jazz *can* and *has been* performed necessarily brings up the issue of the paradoxical status jazz occupies in American culture. During the 1940s and 1950s, when musicians, criticism and listeners were already conceiving of jazz as a “high” art requiring an extensive skill set and years of training – as well as an elite patronage system – institutionally and economically jazz remained “low.” Avant-garde jazz during the 1960s particularly occupied this uncomfortable netherworld in which rigorous aesthetics and poor conditions of production coexisted. The history of jazz venues since the 1967 repeal of New York’s “cabaret laws” directly informs and appears within LES scene participants’ elaborations of the “jazz is dead” trope.¹¹ I turn now to consider the content of some of the versions of this trope, as well as the various kinds of cultural work that the trope accomplishes within the scene.

2.21 Why Is Jazz Dying?

Jazz has more lives than a cat, and it has been losing them continually since its emergence in the early 20th century. At various times, musicians and critics have predicted its obsolescence as a musical genre or idiom and announced the irrelevance of the word as a label or descriptor for music (thus also engaging the question of its generic boundaries).¹² Numerous scholars and musicians have noted the ambiguous etymology

¹¹ See Currie (2011) and Heller (2011) for more details on the history of New York jazz venues from about 1970 to 2010.

¹² John Gennari’s (2006) thorough history of jazz criticism bears this point out. He notes that, from the 1930s to the 1950s, a slew of critics opposed to the stylistic overhauls of bebop opined that “true” jazz had died (2006:376). In 2011, trumpeter Nicholas Payton posted thoughts on the word “jazz” to his blog

and problematic connotations of the word “jazz.”¹³ Despite the apparent limitations and insufficiency of the word “jazz” to encompass and index a whole web of musical idioms in which improvisation and African American cultural practices are key elements, “jazz” continues to circulate as concept and vocabulary. The word continues to be spoken by musicians, listeners, critics, scholars, members of the music industry. This is in part a matter of practicality and expediency. Like any generic designation, those with a close relationship to “jazz” know that the music cannot be reduced to or contained within a list of attributes or characteristics: the rhythmic feel known as swing would seem intrinsic to jazz, yet not all jazz actually *swings*; jazz is supposedly music in which improvisation plays a crucial role, but jazz practitioners and scholars would most likely be reluctant to claim that Duke Ellington’s large-scale compositions are *not* jazz. Putting a label to a wide variety of music serves a discursive and communicative purpose: it allows one to use a shorthand to refer to this web of musical practices and styles. It also points to the social fact of jazz: in the imaginations and lives of people, there *is* such a musical style or genre or idiom as “jazz,” even if its boundaries are constantly moving and its essence continually evading one’s grasp.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the inadequacy of the label of “avant-garde jazz” to categorize the many sounds to which it is attached. This insufficiency recapitulates, on a

(Payton 2011). Written in poetic form, as a kind of litany, the post offers a polemic against the continued use of “jazz” as a music-generic category.

¹³ For a compilation of uses of the word “jazz,” see Part I of *Riffs and Choruses* (Clark 2001:13–54). See Art Taylor’s (Taylor 1993) interviews with fellow jazz musicians for several examples of musicians expressing ambivalence about or dissatisfaction with the word “jazz” as a generic label for their music.

smaller scale, broader and older debates about the generic boundaries of “jazz.”¹⁴ I understand musical genre as a social process of continual negotiation (Fellezs 2011; Gray 2013; Holt 2007; Meintjes 2003; Novak 2013). When walking through a record store (for those who still do that), shopping for music online, and reading music journalism, a given genre might strike one as contained and closed. But this apparent wholeness is more like a mirage: as you try to approach it, you find it has slipped out of reach. The play between genre’s seeming solidity and its actual fluidity animates music scenes and cultures. If music genres are constituted by debates about their borders, the murkiness of “jazz” and “avant-garde jazz” is precisely the quality that allows LES scene members to work upon overlapping and conflicting conceptions of the canons of jazz. The openness of “jazz” as a category enables the diachronic reproduction of the trope of jazz’s precarious health.

On several occasions, and in one way or another, scene members told me that jazz was in trouble. John Rogers, a dedicated listener and professional photographer who specializes in photos of live performance, prophesized that avant-jazz would soon be extinct in New York City. He believed a lack of venues would bring about this extinction. Nor did he believe there was a healthier experimental jazz scene in another U.S. city.

¹⁴ The question of genre has figured prominently (one might even say *plagued*) jazz studies for decades. This partly because the field is defined by its study of a specific genre: continual critical reassessment of the genre comprises one of the most important ongoing conversations of the field. Jazz studies is also perennially concerned with the politics of genre definition and naming because of these are questions about who holds the *power* to name and define musical genres. The primary analytic through which jazz studies has engaged these questions of power is the musical genre’s imbrication with the history of structural racism in the United States. Countless pieces of jazz scholarship offer an account of the genre. Just as many provide critiques of discourses of race in the processes of genre debate that have occurred within U.S. jazz cultures. A very partial list of work that critically engages with the politics of defining “jazz” includes: (Ake, Garrett, and Goldmark 2012; Anderson 2007; Burke 2008; DeVaux 1991; Fellezs 2011; Pond 2003; Porter 2002; Solis 2008)

Among others scene members, the lack of a centralized venue dedicated to avant-jazz similarly boded poorly for the scene. Even though AFA was presenting its RUCMA series at the Local 269, things weren't what they used to be.

As I delved deeper into the scene, a music venue named the Knitting Factory kept coming up in conversation, but in a way that was unfamiliar to me. I had known about the Knitting Factory since the late '90s, when I attended a jazz workshop that used the club during its off hours in the daytime. During fieldwork for the present study, I came to think of the Knitting Factory I knew as the "New Knitting Factory." Steve Dalachinsky, Steve Holtje, Yuko Otomo, Jeff Schlanger, Steve Swell, and other scene regulars all talked about the "Old Knitting Factory." This was where avant-jazz temporarily had a "home," certain scene members told me. Charles Gayle and John Zorn held regular gigs and broadened their audience. The Old Knitting Factory's anteriority, the fact that it was a place that only *used to exist*, crucially inflected stories that circulated about it.

The Knitting Factory opened in 1987 on East Houston St; it is this location that scene members referred to as the "Old Knitting Factory." While listeners and musicians around lower Manhattan often think of the Knitting Factory as a "white" club – that is, primarily featuring racially white musicians and catering to a white audience – participants in the LES avant-jazz scene recognize that the Old Knitting Factory became an important venue for the presentation of avant-jazz.¹⁵ This prior incarnation of the

¹⁵ For a succinct account of the Knitting Factory's involvement with avant-jazz, see Such (1993: 88-89). Writing in 1993, Such acknowledges the club's beneficiary role in promoting "out jazz" but is skeptical about the future of jazz in the club. 16 years later, Scott Currie bears out Such's skepticism: "the Knitting

Knitting Factory on East Houston St was where Gayle's continuation of the sonic and spiritual ideals of Coltrane and Ayler grew up, came into its musical maturity. At the *Old* Knitting Factory, "the music" was fresh, new, exhilarating, uncoded. Avant-jazz scene members who were participating at the time viewed the Knitting Factory's move to TriBeCa in 1994 as a watershed event. The "new" Knitting Factory would occupy three floors in its TriBeCa location, in order to allow for simultaneous shows and therefore a much larger draw of patrons. Avant-jazz stalwarts, who had already been skeptical about the sincerity of the Knitting Factory's interest in promoting the music, saw bottom-line capitalism in clubowner Michael Dorf's decision to expand. For them the move marked the beginning of the end of the Knitting Factory's dedication to *truly* experimental music.¹⁶

A club named Tonic seemed to be the next hope for avant-jazz musicians. Founded in 1998, Tonic soon began to acquire a reputation as a venue sympathetic to avant-jazz. This reputation grew in the early 2000s. At the same time, a venue named the Stone opened in 2005. The Stone was specifically dedicated to presenting experimental and avant-garde music that drew from jazz, underground rock, contemporary classical, and other traditions.¹⁷

Factory's skillful exploitation of fringe jazz-rock crossover potential created at least as many challenges for the emergent Vision scene as possibilities" (Currie 2009: 197).

¹⁶ In conversation, a veteran listener and stalwart of the avant-jazz scene said: "Michael Dorf came up with a festival that he thought would make money...Stephanie Stone and Irving Stone told him he should put Charles Gayle on his label when he started the label. He didn't give a fuck about the music. He just trusted Stephanie and Irving." For obvious reasons, this scene member requested that this comment remain anonymous.

¹⁷ While the Stone presents avant-jazz musicians fairly often, the overall profile of the club fits the "Downtown" designation that was also used as a label for the styles of music featured at the Knitting

The closing of Tonic in 2007 marked another crucial moment for the LES avant-jazz scene.¹⁸ Patricia Nicholson Parker and experimental musician Marc Ribot participated in a committee whose purpose was to formulate a plan of action to advocate for government support and funding of the experimental music made Downtown. The committee organized a protest, including several concerts and Ribot's voluntary arrest, intended to publicize the injustice of Tonic's forced closure due to massive rent increases. The aftermath of this protest reveals a factionalizing among LES experimental musicians that may have led to the increased sense of separation I observed between the "avant-jazz" and "Downtown" scenes during 2009 and 2010.

AFA launched its RUCMA initiative in response to Tonic's closing. The words "Rise Up" pointed to the feeling, shared by Patricia Nicholson Parker and the circle of musicians with whom she associated, that the demise of Tonic placed avant-jazz musicians and the health of the genre in an especially dire predicament. Ribot, however, saw implications of autocracy in AFA's actions:

In the months following the Tonic action, differences over strategy had already begun to appear, with some—including Barbara Burch, of Neues Kabarett—favoring a larger, more inclusive organization that would reach out to more presenters of creative musics and their affiliated musicians, and others—notably Patricia Nicholson

Factory. Some of the major musicians in this scene are John Zorn, Marc Ribot, Fred Frith, Wayne Horvitz, Jim Black. All are improvisers who have varying levels of familiarity with and investment in the notion of a "jazz tradition." Typically, the "Downtown" scene is racially coded as white. George Lewis (Lewis 2008) provides a nuanced and perceptive account of the complex racial politics and genre blending that characterize the "Downtown scene."

¹⁸ The recent anthology *People Get Ready* includes several essays that discuss the question of institutional support for free improvisation and experimental jazz (see Heble and Wallace 2013:141–196). The chapters by Ribot and Barzel specifically discuss the musical networks on the Lower East Side, the "Downtown scene" (which intersects but is not coterminous with my mapping of the avant-jazz scene), the closing of Tonic and AFA's RUCMA initiative. In a rhetoric very similar to the trope of jazz's precarity, Ribot protests the ways that gentrification on the Lower East Side has starved the experimental music scenes that once flourished in the area.

Parker, of Arts of Art/Vision Festival (AFA)—favoring a much smaller, more streamlined committee.

Streamlining won out: by the end of the summer of 2007, there were no presenters affiliated with the committee (which had named itself Rise Up Creative Music and Arts, or RUCMA) other than AFA. (Ribot 2013:145)

On the basis of factual veracity, the “jazz is dead” discourse appears unfounded.

While establishments that present live jazz are constantly going under, new ones are constantly opening. The ephemerality of clubs that present jazz (especially avant-jazz) in New York may lead to an ecology of jazz venues that is fast-paced and treacherous, but not one that is at risk of total extinction. In spite of the survival of jazz venues, jazz record labels, and businesses that specialize in selling jazz recordings, metaphors of extinction and death persist within jazz scenes. When LES scene participants talk about how things used to be better for avant-jazz, they implicitly lay claim to important knowledge of and unusual insight into shifts in cultural practices and aesthetics. They identify themselves as people “in the know.” Paradoxically, while often frowning upon more traditionalist figures in the jazz world, the discourse of jazz’s impending doom actually *secures* the LES scene’s ties to the larger jazz tradition by virtue of the very fact that the scene is *rehearsing* a narrative trope that has circulated within the jazz world for decades. Predicting or announcing the obsolescence of a certain style of jazz, or more flamboyantly the death of all jazz, has often been a key strategy for the connoisseur of jazz to identify himself.

The aficionado of an avant-garde or experimental art who recognizes the fragility of its existence can occupy multiple class positions in an economy of culture. Historically, the ability to cultivate an “aesthetic disposition” (Bourdieu 1984) coincided with economic capital, by definition - it was the aristocracy who knew fine art from low

entertainment. Jazz's shift from the latter to the former over the course of the 20th century helps to create the conditions that enable avant-jazz participants to accumulate a wealth of cultural capital even while belonging to lower economic classes.¹⁹ Appreciating a nonconformist, avant-garde form like avant-jazz can actually be used as proof of one's populist, proletarian ideals. Thus the appreciation of an esoteric, experimental art becomes a practice of expressing egalitarian values.

2.3 The Venues

We are now ready to begin our virtual tour of LES scene venues. As I move through my descriptions, I discuss how each venue presents rough edges. The roughness of the concert in El Jardin was both the result of honest mistakes in organization and planning *and* a reflection of a purposive multisensory aesthetic of rough edges and roughness that animates avant-jazz and the LES scene's practice of the genre. In different ways, each of the locations I describe in this chapter manifests a feeling of roughness or rough edges. Often visual and tactual, these rough edges create multisensory resonances with the sonic roughness of avant-jazz. These rough edges may be due to economic vicissitudes but just as often they result from conscious choices made by venue proprietors. As aestheticized expressions of a volunteered marginality, they help amplify

¹⁹ For Bernard Gendron, the fact that the discursive shift of jazz from a "low" to a "high" art (through the work of musicians, critics, and listeners) did not include the politico-economic shift to more affluent systems of patronage, institutional support, and induction into formal education marks the turning point from modernism to postmodernism in Euro-American aesthetics and history (Gendron 2002:121, ff.). Piekut modulates Gendron's argument when he points out that systemic racism played a large role in preventing 1960s black avant-garde jazz musicians from securing the kind of durable patronage networks and institutions that the white avant-garde (i.e., John Cage, et al.) enjoyed (Piekut 2011:138–139).

the roughness that the LES avant-jazz scene hears in the music. In addition to the rough edges particular to each venue, a common thread that emerges is the impermanence of venues dedicated to experimental and avant-garde performing arts. This impermanence, this “treacherous ecology” of performance venues, as I figure it above, feeds into the experience of roughness that circulates within the avant-jazz scene.

2.31 The Local 269

The address of 269 E Houston St lies at that street’s intersection with Suffolk St, on the southeast corner. This corner straddles the border between the East Village and Lower East Side (LES) neighborhoods of Manhattan. More specifically, the address is located at the southern edge of Alphabet City, and Suffolk St is adjacent to Ave B. This places the address in a transitional zone: the transition between the full-blown gentrification of the East Village and the gentrification-in-progress taking place within the current-day borders of the Lower East Side, but also the transition from the more affluent *western* portion of the East Village/Alphabet City to the easternmost reaches of that neighborhood, where working-class black and Latino residents retain a visible presence.

From 2009 to 2012, the ground-level storefront at this address was occupied by a bar named “The Local 269,” which often featured musical acts. This was the music venue I visited most frequently during fieldwork. During 2009 and 2010, the RUCMA music series, produced by AFA and featuring most of the musicians who also play the Vision Festival, was hosted by the Local 269. As I discuss in Chapter 1, part of the agenda that

Patricia Parker has set for AFA is making connections between the esoteric aesthetics of avant-jazz and the populist ethos carried on by long-term East Village and LES residents. 269's location, then, made it highly suitable as a venue in which to present RUCMA.

The first time I frequented the Local 269 was in February of 2009, not long after I began fieldwork. In browsing through the music listings for that night, I decided to try a place called "The Local 269," which had heretofore not shown up on my jazz radar. It had a low cover charge (\$10 a set or \$15 for both, student rate: \$7/12), and was located in the LES; I thought it might be another location to add to my list of "go-to" Downtown jazz venues. Bern Nix, who was billed as the guitarist who played in Ornette Coleman's 1970s Primetime band, performed in a trio setting. The place felt intimate - a neighborhood bar that looked like it counted a couple of unseemly drunkards among its regulars, a bar that just happened to have booked avant-garde jazz musicians. It was not too crowded. The lighting was incandescent and warm, and not very effective.

It was notable to me that there were pretzels on the bar counter; this struck me as a charming instance of performed nostalgia, a throwback to the old stereotype of a complimentary bowl of peanuts, pretzels, or other salty snack to make you thirsty and keep you drinking. The bartender was a white man in his early 40s with dark brown hair, slicked back and falling down his neck to about the line of his shirt and a decent amount of stubble. He wore something like jeans and a black t-shirt. He was friendly and offered some more pretzels sticks once I had munched down the two or three that were in the jar in front of me.

When the music was in full swing, say at about 9pm on a given Monday night, the bar was dark – black mat paint on most of the walls, dark wooden molding. The main bar area was one room. Walking in from Houston St, one was immediately *in* the bar, no vestibule, no hallway or the like. Directly ahead sat the right-hand edge of the bar. To the diagonal left (about 10 to 11 o'clock) was an area filled with a few tables. Further beyond the tables at the eastern (left-most, from the perspective of the doorway) side of the room was the bandstand. At the left-hand end of the bar was the staff entryway. To visit either lavatory one had to walk right by the stage-left side of the bandstand.

Immediately to the left of the entryway lay a large, box-like wooden protrusion. This was the cover for the stairway leading down to the cellar. The cover was made of wood more than strong enough to support the weight of a person; on Monday nights painter/drawer Alan Bolle, would set up shop atop this box. He'd perch with a drawing board and an array of paints, charcoal, pastels. His work represented the musicians and the sounds they created, but he also conceived of it as a cross-sensory response to the musical goings-on.²⁰ For a few months from mid- to late-2009, Alan's pieces decorated the walls of the 269. It looked like visual evidence of the bar's embracing its status as a home for the Visionfest/LES "outjazz" scene. This was when it looked like things were going well between the AFA/Visionfest crowd and the Local 269.

²⁰ Alan was one of a few visual artists who would paint or draw in an improvisatory manner in response to the improvised music of the scene. The most renowned of these artists is Jeff Schlanger. Both Schlanger and Alan conceive of their work as an interaction/collaboration with the music. I discuss Schlanger and the trend of "painting one's listening" further in Chapter 3.

The 269's space was compact enough that I often had to make sure not to bump into a musician on my way into the mens' room. The small size of the venue made it possible to hear very quiet passages of music, as long as the audience and customers kept quiet. When horn players and/or drummers dug in, their sound filled the space. The prevalence of hard surfaces - wood, concrete, brick - made the room live, but the low ceiling kept the acoustics from being muddy.



**Figure 1. Exterior of the Local 269 pictured in 2011.
(Corner of E Houston and Suffolk Streets, New York, NY.²¹)**

²¹ This photo appears on the following webpage: <http://forgotten-ny.com/2010/11/red-square/>. The website functions like a blog with posts highlighting neighborhoods around New York City. The specific post from which I took Figure 1 mentions that “this stretch of East Houston has been home to The Mercury Lounge and The Knitting Factory, now located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.”



**Figure 2. Interior of the Local 269 on Dec 21 2009,
with the bandstand (left) and bar (right) shown.
(Photo by author)**

Floodlights tinted red, green, and blue illuminated the bandstand. The rest of the room was lit by incandescent bulbs in small chandeliers and wall fixtures, with an occasional tinted bulb thrown in for flavor. Behind the bandstand lay the eastern wall of the bar. It was covered in a black faux-wood veneer. Sometime in late October of 2009, the management put up a logo on the wall (see Figure 2 below). In a typeface matching the signs outside the bar, the logo read “The Local 269” in white.

The word-play of the name “Local 269” can be traced in several directions. Most obviously, the name references the bar’s address on Houston St. The “dive” atmosphere and ethos of the place inflects the “local” qualifier with a sense of place – literally of locality – of being the down-to-earth, local bar to which neighborhood residents and regulars can venture for an unpretentious libation. “Local” can mean a public house or

drinking establishment in the UK, Ireland, and Australia. During my fieldwork period in 2009 and 2010, the bar was owned by a married couple wherein the wife was of Irish descent, making this connotation of “local” all the more relevant. Finally, when taking into account the historical figuration of both the LES as a working-class neighborhood, “local” and “269” combine to reference the typical nomenclature of labor unions in the Anglophone world. Hence the dive atmosphere was amplified and given further texture by the bar’s name: here was a dive bar that bore witness to the neighborhood’s past. Naming the bar a “Local” may also have been a purposeful reference to other rock venues that reside in former labor union halls; this is plausible given the presence of rock programming during my fieldwork and the current-day shift to concentrating on rock.²²

The vague connotations of the name “Local 269” evoke the hipster aesthetic prevalent in much of the East Village and LES (see Chapter 1). This reference to the proletariat is difficult to trace beyond a surface-level signification. “Workingclassness” is divorced from the lived experiences of blue-collar workers and reduced to an aesthetic, an experiential ingredient that acts as a kind of atmospheric MSG to enhance the flavor of the bar. From my observations on Monday evenings, the sartorial and conversational styles of bar customers – both those who came to hear music and those who came to drink – there were few if any blue-collar workers.

What does it mean for the bar to fit the “dive” category? The “dive” bar is a site of nostalgic narratives of authenticity. A bar that deliberately affects the image and stylings of a dive aims to appeal to the customer who wants to drink and hang out in a “real”

²² I thank Ali Colleen Neff for pointing out the union-hall trend among rock clubs.

place, rather than a corporate chain of restaurant/bars, or a stuffy, elitist cocktail lounge that caters to an unabashedly wealthy clientele. In a dive bar, rough edges give proof of the proprietor's commitment to his or her take on authenticity. It has cultivated rough edges for aesthetic effect. It has no carpeting; there are no placemats on the tables; there is no food served. Signs of wear and tear, such as chips and scuffs in the paint on the walls, abrasions to wood fixtures, other discolorations and stains, were left unrepaired to provide a "patina" (Appadurai 1996) of age, use, and therefore authenticity.

During the first few months in which I frequented the 269, I was fortunate if I found paper towels in the men's room. Later on paper towels were apparently phased out and I considered myself lucky if there was enough toilet paper to wipe my hands after washing them in the sink. Hand soap was an erratic amenity. The bar offered a typical variety of distilled spirits, wine, and had a selection of both craft and mass-produced beers on tap.

§

In August of 2009, Brad Farberman told me that he could see the Local 269 becoming a "real place" for avant-jazz. As an assistant of Patricia Parker, Brad had been curating much of the RUCMA series during that year and often worked the door at the Local 269 during RUCMA shows. By the early months of 2010, Brad was confiding to me that the relationship between AFA (the organization that produced the RUCMA series) and the bar had grown tense; he suspected RUCMA might soon be looking for a new venue.

Brad's statements were borne out by the two moments I recount in the introduction to this chapter. The gradual erosion of the amicable relationship between a bar and an avant-jazz performance series was visible, audible, perceivable in moments of interaction and encounter in which subtle aggressions were obliquely aimed. The terms under which the Local 269 agreed to provide a venue for RUCMA were inherently compromised. The bar's willingness to allow a music series to take place on its premises *so long as* anyone who wanted to could enter as a customer of the bar only undermined the supposedly reciprocal relationship between the bar and the music series. A live music performance could take place within the bar, and an admission fee could be collected from people who had come to hear music. Yet this musical event in no way was to interfere with the primary purpose of the bar - selling beer, wine, and liquor to people who had come to drink.

2.32 The Stone

Standing on the northwest corner of the intersection at Ave C and E 2nd St, you'd have to look closely at the door of the storefront to see a small sign that reads "the Stone." Its exterior is virtually unmarked, occulted, almost forbidding. Metal gates occlude the windows on both sides of the door. Even when the Stone is open for a performance it can appear closed to the uninitiated; to those only pass by the wall of metal gates during the daytime it may even look like a neglected storefront without a tenant. Visits to the Stone are purposive.

The interior of the Stone follows through on what the exterior implies. Beyond the front door lies a smallish room, perhaps the size of the Local 269. Most of the interior walls are painted a plain, matted white, some a matte black. The exterior wall next to E 2nd Street exposes its brick masonry; curtains intermittently cover this wall, and provide some sound dampening. A clearing in the middle of the room forms the bandstand; a baby-grand piano sits in this clearing. Rows of folding metal chairs form the audience spaces; some of the chairs sit behind the bandstand, next to the brick wall. The single bathroom is also located behind the bandstand, next to the small secondary seating area. A small, narrow staircase, stage left if one is situated in the bandstand area, leads downstairs to an area from which the performers generally emerge, if they are not already hanging around within the main space prior to their performance.

As I indicate above, the Stone's creation directly relates to the failing relationship between avant-jazz and Downtown experimental musicians and the Knitting Factory. By the early 2000s, John Zorn had become possibly the most visible and successful member of the Downtown music scene. Using his clout and funds, he opened the Stone in 2005 as a kind of antidote to the music venues in which avant-jazz musicians had to work. Zorn named the Stone after the late Irving Stone, a champion, along with his wife Stephanie, of the overlapping avant-jazz and Downtown music scenes. This naming was a tribute to the Stones' status as expert listeners within the music scenes on the Lower East Side.

The Stone is a "music-only" joint: no food, no liquor license. Just pay your ten dollars, find a seat, listen to the music when it starts and remain quiet while it continues. My experience was that the Stone's management did not concern itself with effective

climate control in the space. On warmer nights in summer, late spring or early fall, a wall-mounted air-conditioner might be running prior to a performance, only to be turned off once the music began due to the noise it emitted. I often saw listeners fan themselves with sheets of paper or other makeshift fans, as I, too, sat sweating before and during performances.²³

Music venues often become crowded with listeners – for many this physical proximity adds to the intensity of the aesthetic and social experience. In the Stone, physical proximity was often compounded by the implicit injunction to remain absolutely silent during musical performances. Scene members told stories about how talkative and unscrupulous audience members might cause this injunction to become explicit: chiding scowls from others in the audience, venue staff, and even musicians; possibly a quick reprimand communicated in hushed tones or a “shh” gesture of the index finger placed against pursed lips. In a small, crowded space, acoustic silence from the audience usually requires bodily stillness; this stillness threw any routine movements - adjustments of one’s legs, shifts in body weight from one buttock to the other - into bold relief. The swishing of clothing might become acutely perceptible, and thus inappropriate, during an especially quite and/or sparse musical passage. While I heard almost universal praise for the Stone’s music programming during my verbal interactions with other listeners, a few

²³ Scanning reviews of the Stone on yelp.com confirm the common assessment of its musical programming as excellent and its amenities as minimal. For many online reviewers, as for avant-jazz scene members and, if the Stone’s website is an indication, Zorn himself, its lack of creature comforts confirms its singular devotion to music. The phrase “no bullshit” repeatedly appears in the Yelp reviews to describe the experience of listening to music at the Stone, as in, “no bullshit, just music.” This ideology of how performing arts should be presented owes much to the history of experimentalism - the “Downtown” scene - in New York. It also traces back to high-art discourses that posit the necessary opposition of artistic-aesthetic authenticity and bourgeois comforts and commercialism.

scene members remarked on the discomforts of actually listening to music there, for the reasons I describe above.



Figure 3. Exterior of the Stone.
The unmarked glass door is the venue's entrance.
(Photo from <http://newyorkevents.co/event/brad-mehldau-mark-guiliana/>)

Booking and programming at the Stone is accomplished on a strictly curatorial basis: each month, a musician (of artistic director John Zorn's choosing) has the privilege/obligation of scheduling the month's performances. These curators are permitted, and usually do, include their own performances into the schedule. The *de facto* result is that being chosen to serve as curator of the Stone also means being given a lot of performance opportunities. As the venue's website prominently states, 100% of cover fees go to the musicians (see <http://thestonenyc.com/index.html>).

Plain white walls and black drapes could lend a sense of smooth asceticism, streamlined austerity. What does this stripped-down ambience have to do with rough edges? Rough edges lie in the choice to ignore ergonomics, maintain a minimum of climate control. If one interprets the no-frills operation of the Stone as a sign of complete dedication to *the music itself*, and hence a marker of a kind of authenticity of artistic and intellectual intentionality, then rough edges can be felt throughout the venue. A precious stone bearing rough edges is unfinished; the authenticity of its “natural” form remains plainly in view. The unadorned, unfinished style of the Stone communicates its authenticity as a venue for music that does not compromise its aesthetics, sonic density, and intellectual rigor.

2.33 The Brecht Forum

The Brecht Forum sits on West St, at the western edge of Manhattan island, next to the Hudson River. Due to the Brecht’s extreme westward location within Greenwich Village, the walk to the venue is long no matter which subway one takes to the neighborhood. Before its current location in a building that previously housed a gym, the Brecht Forum moved around lower Manhattan (Joseph 2010). The institution is named after the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, and describes itself as, “a cultural and educational center for people who are working for social justice, equality and a new culture that puts human needs first” (see <http://brechtforum.org/about>). Its origins lie in the New York Marxist School, which was founded in 1975 by a group of community organizers and activists. The Brecht Forum’s interest in community outreach and left-

wing education places it in the same ideological terrain as AFA, and the history of grassroots activism on the Lower East Side (which I outline in Chapter 1).

The Brecht Forum is remote (within the geographic scale of lower Manhattan) in comparison to the clustering of avant-jazz activity around the Lower East Side. However, the Brecht Forum hosts the *Neues Kabarett* music series, which has featured avant-jazz and other experimental music styles since its inception in 1998 (<http://brechtforum.org/neueskabarett>). LES scene stalwarts Richard and Roberta Berger and Ras Moshe all work as volunteers to help produce and curate the series. In addition, Ras Moshe hosts a regular music session at the Brecht Forum, under the title *Music Now!* Although the format Moshe uses – musicians getting together to play unrehearsed music in a relatively informal setting – strongly echoes the archetype of the jazz jam session, I am hesitant to call installments of “Music Now” jam sessions because of the ways in which the former differs from the latter. *Music Now!* often involves collective improvisations that bear little of the competitive spirit that defines the jam session in jazz discourse. I did not observe anything akin to a “cutting contest,” in which musicians try to outplay one another while improvising over the chord progressions of standard tunes, when I attended Ras’ sessions. Also, though informal in feel, the sessions are open to an audience, and there is usually a cover charge.

One enters the Brecht Forum from West St, a wide thoroughfare that feeds into the Joe DiMaggio Highway around 55th Street. Directly ahead of the front doors is a lobby, beyond that one can see the large room in which music performances take place. To the left of the entryway lies a kitchen area with refrigerator and bar. During *Neues*

Kabarett shows, volunteers sell wine, beer, and snacks to raise a bit of extra money for the series. The performance room is angular, with most walls painted a light cream color. A narrow section of exterior wall exposes the brick masonry of the building. Musicians usually created a stage area up against the walls furthest from the entrance to the Brecht, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Performance room of the Brecht Forum.
Ras Moshe (right, holding saxophone) and associates perform during an installment of *Music Now!*
(photograph by author)

The hard surfaces of the room make the acoustics of the room echo-y and sometimes boomy. Drums, wind instruments, and of course any amplified instruments could overpower an ensemble and saturate the room. The audiences for *Neues Kabarett* and the RUCMA shows at 269 overlapped significantly. Musicians often came to listen and hang at *Music Now!* sessions as they would with RUCMA shows. Audience talk

during *Neues Kabarett* shows and *Music Now!* sessions was minimal. The few times I helped work the bar, I observed that some members of the NK collective spent much of the evening's performances hanging out around the bar, making conversation and occasionally "tuning in" to the sounds of the performance as they travelled over from the open performance space.

The Brecht Forum is neither a bar that features music nor a venue primarily dedicated to the performing arts. Therefore it falls outside the two primary types of spaces in which jazz performances typically take place. Despite this, the Brecht appears in the jazz venue directories of both *The New York City Jazz Record* (a free publication circulated around the city) and *Jazz Near You* (a website presenting region-specific jazz event listings).²⁴ However, the Brecht does not appear in the otherwise voluminous jazz listings of *TimeOutNY* or *The New York Times*, both periodicals aimed to a broader, less jazz-centric audience.

Knowledge of the Brecht Forum as a place to hear more exploratory styles of jazz marks one as more than a casual jazz listener. While the Stone's management has chosen to construct the club as an exclusive, secretive music venue, this choice occurs as a kind of social performance, a communication of style. Narratives about the Stone circulate among musicians who work in experimental edges of music across several genres or scenes, as well as New York residents and visitors with an inclination to consume "serious" or "high" expressive culture. In contrast, the Brecht Forum has not marketed

²⁴ See <http://www.nycjazzrecord.com/> and <http://nyc.jazznearyou.com/>.

itself *primarily* as a location for the performance and dissemination of experimental and avant-garde art and performance. It occupies marginal positions within various art worlds in the New York City culturescape.²⁵ While it may strike the reader as symbolically significant that the Brecht Forum lies well outside the geographical boundaries of the Lower East Side - the neighborhood that AFA and various scene members discursively construct as the historical home and current epicenter of avant-jazz music - Anthony Basich, the Bergers, Steve Dalachinsky, Ras Moshe, and other LES avant-jazz scene participants consider the Brecht a significant location within the scene.

The avant-jazz scene maintains a makeshift relationship with the Brecht Forum. Since the institution carries out a mission of disseminating radical political thought and experimental art, avant-jazz musicians are able to use the space on regular occasions. But this is not a “home” for avant-jazz; it is a place with which musicians and listeners *make do*. In the 1970s, jazz musicians formed the venue networks of the “loft-jazz scene” by availing themselves of the low rents in SoHo and the Lower East Side. They made do. Squatters who availed themselves of dilapidated, abandoned buildings on Lower East Side during this same period also made do. Making use of whatever resources present themselves, including a left-wing educational center, LES avant-jazz scene members literally work upon their dedication to the genre. The imperfection of the Brecht Forum as a performance space gives affective texture to the avant-jazz events held there. Sounds

²⁵ I am riffing on the five “scapes” that Arjun Appadurai defines and discusses in *Modernity at Large* (1996). Since the Brecht Forum presents classes, lectures, and workshops in addition to performing arts, I am imagining a metaphorical space or plane that subsumes these various forms of cultural production. Thus the Brecht circulates within music scenes, film scenes, networks of left-wing activism, etc.

from without penetrate the performance room; the boundaries of its acoustic space are not cleanly defined. In my experience very few of the audience seats were in a position to provide an unobstructed view of whoever was performing. Columns usually got in the way of at least part of one's view, causing most listeners to intermittently crane their necks and tilt their heads.

2.34 The Bowery Poetry Club

The Bowery Poetry Club (BPC) sat on the west side of the thoroughfare known as the Bowery in a short, two-story building dating to 1850.²⁶ Across from its location are newly-constructed luxury condominiums, all right angles, bright new brick and glass. Known mainly as a venue for spoken word performance, the BPC also programmed music with regularity.

The Club was divided into two basic areas: in the front was the “cafe” area, further off the street entrance and beyond the cafe was the performance space, which also housed a bar. The cafe area housed a few brightly-colored tables; caffeinated drinks, hot dogs, and a few other snacks can be purchased. At the back end of the cafe area, just before the performance space, lay a vestibule that led to a staircase carrying one downstairs to the bathrooms. Scrawled writing and bits of graffiti covered the walls of the mens' room. The stall dividers, made of galvanized steel, were adorned with hundreds of stickers and more

²⁶ My description of the BPC in this chapter applies to the space and venue as it existed during my fieldwork in 2009 and 2010. The building housing the BPC closed for renovation in July 2012. Upon its reopening, the space formerly occupied by the BPC was shared with Duane Park, a burlesque and dinner club. The arrangement allows the BPC to hold events on Sundays and Mondays, with Duane Park using the venue for the rest of the week to provide dining, burlesque shows, and jazz performances to an affluent clientele. See (Solomon 2012) and (Kudak 2013).

writing. Facing the bar in the performance space, several portraits painted in bright colors rose above the large collection of liquor bottles. The stage was elevated, and a banner bearing the name of the establishment hung just in front of the black backdrop curtain. The walls on either side of the stage were exposed brick. Performances were illuminated with tinted and filtered lights - lots of blues, reds, greens.

Despite all the bright colors of the furnishings and decoration, the place had a dark, dimly-lit feel. Light sources are generally bare bulbs protruding from ceiling or wall fixtures, or small weak lamps giving off a tinted glow. The whole club felt busy - the crowded bathroom collages, the mottled panorama of portraits behind the bar, the small area up near the front door devoted to books for purchase. In keeping with its homage to and continuation of the experimental arts history of the East Village, the BPC projected a rough, DIY ethos through the visual patchwork it presented to the public.



Figure 4. The Bowery Poetry Club during a spoken word performance.
(Photo from: (Bowery Poetry Club in New York, NY n.d.))

Most of times I visited the BPC it was for the monthly showcase put on by the resurrected ESP-Disk' record label. On those nights, ESP employees set up a merchandise table at the back of the BPC performance room, across from the bar. They sold the label's releases in CD and vinyl formats. They also sold some books related to the label and to avant-jazz: poetry, essays and other creative writing, some of Steve Dalachinsky's books of jazz poetry, the latest issue of *Tribes*, the publication put out by "A Gathering of the Tribes" gallery/salon. The BPC itself did not enforce any kind of audience decorum, and generally let ESP-Disk' set the tone for these events. An audience member occasionally ordered a drink from the bar. I rarely saw anyone shop at the ESP-Disk' merchandise table *during* a musical performance, though this was not prohibited. During a performance, the audience typically concentrated on the stage. Talk, if it occurred, was quiet and unobtrusive. The lack of an overt "no-talking" policy and gave BPC avant-jazz events a less formal vibe. Though RUCMA did not (and *could* not) enforce a no-talking policy in the 269, the small size of that room made any aberrant audience noise more conspicuous. The BPC's performance room was significantly larger, and a PA system amplified music, including acoustic instruments like saxophones and brass. Talk and other small disturbances during performances seemed to get lost in the size of the room and drowned out by the PA's sound. If you really wanted to chat *while* still keeping one ear on the set, you could stand at the back of the room, near the bar, and not bother the more fully-engaged listeners seated towards the front.

The match of ESP-Disk' and BPC seemed fitting. The label has acquired a cult status among avant-jazz enthusiasts over the decades since its inception in the early 1960s. ESP-Disk' recorded Albert Ayler's early recordings, notably his classic *Spiritual Unity*. It featured musicians who were experimenting at the outer reaches of jazz practice, musicians who generally could not garner the support of more mainstream record labels. ESP-Disk' went on to record experimental and fringe music of various sorts: electronic music compositions, underground rock acts, and even a set of recordings Charles Manson made before his incarceration. Through the catalogue it built during the latter half of the 1960s, the label strongly aligned itself with the United States counterculture and with New York's East Village/Lower East Side area specifically. ESP-Disk' released music by underground rock acts such as the Godz and Fugs, who were both products of the East Village Hippie scene. '60s icons Timothy Leary and William Burroughs recorded spoken word projects for the label. The recordings of Albert Ayler's group at Slug's Saloon remain among a handful of recordings from performances at that East Village jazz venue. ESP-Disk' drew its jazz roster from the 1960s LES avant-garde jazz scene. Marion Brown, Burton Greene, Giuseppi Logan, and Frank Wright, who were lesser-known to mainstream jazz audiences and journalists, but who captured the attention of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, lead their first recording dates for ESP-Disk'. In 2005, after years of being defunct and having its catalogue reissued on CD by European labels, ESP-Disk' resumed operations (Weiss 2012: xvii). ESP-Disk' is still reissuing albums from its original 1960s incarnation. It also produced new recordings, many by current-day

avant-jazz musicians, for about seven or eight years after its resurrection, though now that production has drastically been reduced for financial reasons.²⁷

The ESP-Disk' showcases I attended featured both musicians who came to prominence during the '60s - the "original" crop of ESP-Disk' artists - alongside younger avant-jazz musicians. Some of the musicians who performed at these showcases have not done any recording for the label.²⁸ Steve Dalachinsky was often the MC for these performances. He knew most of the staff who worked at the resurrected label, and was familiar, if not friends with, many of the musicians featured at the showcases.

The presentation of ESP-Disk artists at the BPC marks the ways that memories of the Lower East Side's past carried affective weight for avant-jazz scene participants in the early 21st century. The former was a record label that had grown to legendary status, both because of the import of its releases during the 60s and *because of* the very obscurity into which the label and its catalogue fell beginning in the 1970s. ESP-Disk' acquired prestige among jazz musicians and devoted listeners because its recordings had become hard to find. Members of the LES avant-jazz scene were almost uniformly enthusiastic about the record company's revival and new activity. It was a fabled character from the earlier chapters of the story of avant-jazz, and its resurrection was good news for avant-jazz in general. As Stollman shapes the story, the record label's revival was an act motivated by

²⁷ Steve Holtje, personal communication, January 2014.

²⁸ At the April 2009 showcase performance, Paul Thornton from the 60s band the Godz was the only musician performing who had also recorded for ESP-Disk (during the 1960s). He played a solo set; the second set was the Ras Moshe quintet - a group of current-day avant-jazz musicians, none of whom had appeared on ESP-Disk' releases.

his commitment to the music and the musicians who made it.²⁹ Similarly, BPC founder Bob Holman defined the club's mission as "giving a home to poetry as an oral art" (Kudak 2013). Here were two institutions dedicated to the experimental edges of performing arts, who both had a sense of the important role that the Lower East Side played in the history of those art-forms.

2.35 Roulette

At this writing, the music venue Roulette resides in a historic YWCA building in Brooklyn, not far from the new Barclays Center sports arena, and amidst the burgeoning redevelopment at work in the area in and around Downtown Brooklyn.³⁰ While I was engaged in fieldwork, however, Roulette occupied the ground floor of a former warehouse building at 20 Greene St - the bottom edge of the extremely affluent Soho neighborhood. This was a temporary home for the music venue, which founder Jim Staley - himself an improvising trombonist and composer - began running in his loft home in lower Manhattan in 1978.

The exterior of 20 Greene St immediately presented connotations of the fine arts scene. Its white-painted frontispiece looked like the many other galleries in SoHo. Inside, the venue was similarly light-colored, and spacious. The walls were painted an off-white;

²⁹ Stollman has a bad reputation among avant-jazz participants. I heard frequent allusions to greedy and dishonest business practices he employed during the 1960s.

³⁰See (Smith 2011). After several years of nomadically hopping around the Soho area, Roulette moved to a new home in Brooklyn, close to the Atlantic Yards development. Including the Barclays Center, a sports arena which now houses the Brooklyn Nets basketball team and the New York Islanders hockey team, Atlantic Yards is a massive instance of urban renewal and one of the most iconic examples of the meteoric rise of property values and cultural caché that Brooklyn has been experiencing over the past 10-15 years.

the floors, crisp hardwood. Bottles of beer, wine, soft drinks and merchandise were available for purchase at the admission desk. Stage light rigs hung above the stage area, providing the warm, vivid lighting associated with music venues.

The acoustics of the space were good. Curtains hung behind the bandstand and divided the admission desk area from the performance room; they dampened sound sufficiently to prevent the high-ceilinged, large room from becoming “boomy.” Restrooms lay in a short corridor adjacent to the stage area. This location could be inconvenient depending upon how the musicians and audience seating were arranged for a given performance. There was no explicit prohibition against using restrooms during a performance, though actively-engaged audiences and social pressure did their part to make sure that any trips that were taken to the restroom created minimal visual and aural disturbance. The caliber of the mixing console that always sat at the rear of the performance room was sufficient to allow Roulette to easily switch gears into recording studio mode.³¹

Though it features many concerts of avant-jazz and performances featuring musicians who are strongly associated with the LES avant-jazz scene, Roulette’s programming shows that it does not define itself as a “jazz club.” The venue often features music by composers and ensembles who work in contemporary concert idioms (e.g., Meredith Monk, Alarm Will Sound).

³¹ I sat in on a recording session led by pianist Matthew Shipp and engineered by Staley in July of 2009. See (Shipp, Allen, and Morris 2010).



**Figure 5. Roulette's incarnation at 20 Greene St during a crowded performance.
The mixing console can be seen at the right edge of the photo.
(photograph by the author)**

As my description above implies, rough edges - literal or conceptual - were not apparent when you looked around Roulette. There were no gestures towards an aestheticized squalor. The venue seemed to be in good repair and presented a relatively smooth, polished visual and tactile profile. Part of Roulette's roughness lay in its origins - a loft performance space run by an improvising musician. A *New York Times* article covering Roulette's opening in Brooklyn praised founder Jim Staley's "skill as an entrepreneurial impresario," and noted that "Roulette survived the waning of the downtown loft scene during the early 1980s and outlasted storied nightclubs like the original Knitting Factory and Tonic" (Smith 2011). Roulette's roots in the 70s loft scene

of Downtown New York give it a respected pedigree within avant-garde musical circles. This situation of Roulette's founding already granted the venue a gritty texture. Roulette acquires Appadurai's "patina" of age not through worn physical materials, but with the passage of time and the emergence of a nostalgia for the loft-based arts and performance scenes of 1970s among musicians, artists and other New Yorkers.

During my fieldwork, Roulette lay upon a rough edge that traversed geographic and conceptual planes. It was in a seemingly random spot for a significant experimental music venue: about a half block off the always-crowded and noisy Canal St, which is primarily a commercial district. Like the Brecht Forum, Roulette was also relatively far away from the areas in lower Manhattan where jazz musical activity clustered, such as the southernmost portion of the East Village and Greenwich Village. Musicians and listeners who had been familiar with Roulette before its 2006 relocation to SoHo thought of the Greene St home as something new, something temporary. Steve Dalachinsky mentioned on more than one occasion that his understanding was that Staley was still looking for a *true* place to house the venue. So Roulette the venue existed as a social space instantiated and reproduced through the relations of various individuals who congregated to make and listen to music. Roulette the social space could be and has been situated in various physical or geographical spaces. Roulette was in a building on Greene St from 2006 to 2011, but it was more a long-term guest of that location. It was *in* 20 Greene St but not *of* it.

2.4 Why Is Jazz Dying? (Reprise)

If jazz is in trouble (with avant-jazz in especially critical condition), many LES scene members can identify the bogeyman who haunts “real” jazz and musicians unwilling to forsake artistic integrity: Wynton Marsalis.³² It is almost a pastime for scene members to derogate and caricature the trumpeter and Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC). They told me that Marsalis didn’t realize it, but the hip jazz was *still* being made downtown, at the Local 269. They accused Marsalis and jazz critic Stanley Crouch, a long-time associate and champion of Marsalis, of implementing a divide-and-conquer strategy on ideological terrain, turning jazz musicians who work in different styles against each other by promoting an aesthetically narrow definition of the genre. Avant-jazz musicians have even mockingly dedicated a recording to Marsalis.³³ To many in the LES scene,

³² Total opposition to Jazz at Lincoln Center has become the favored method for jazz musicians and listeners to mark their allegiance to forms of jazz practice that, for them, are more *authentic* because they do not rely upon hegemonic cultural institutions. In late 2013, I witnessed an incident in which an avant-jazz musician sardonically referred to Marsalis as a “scary monster.” Knowing the verbal style of this musician and the context in which he delivered the quip, I saw it as a layered message. The derision of Marsalis was sincere, and conveyed a clear feeling of disdain. Yet the hyperbole and infantilizing connotations of the formulation “scary monster” implied a reflexive quality. Though the theoretical frame of “signifyin(g)” (Gates 1988) has been so overused by scholars of African American culture that it now approaches the condition of a bromide, this instance of insult, in which one black musician publicly disparaged another, seemed like a true moment of trickster-like signification. The insult seemed not to take itself too seriously, but its speaker still got in a jab at Marsalis.

³³ The quartet Other Dimensions in Music, composed of veteran avant-jazz musicians, titled one of the tracks on their release *Now!*, “Tears for the Boy Wonder (for Winston Marsalis)” (Other Dimensions in Music 1998). Note the purposeful misspelling of Marsalis’ first name. As a rule, the group plays completely unplanned music – no tunes, no specific preparation for a given group improvisation. This means that the title was probably chosen *after* the performance. To my ears, there are two possible reasons in the music for the reference to Marsalis. First, Daniel Carter plays trumpet (rather than his more common use of saxophone), leading to a lineup of two trumpets, bass and drums. Perhaps more apropos, the first trumpeter to enter uses a plunger mute in a speech-like, growling style reminiscent of Bubber Miley, who pioneered the use of the technique in the 1920s. Marsalis himself often uses the plunger mute in homage to this early-jazz style.

Marsalis is a charlatan who peddles musical snake oil to an affluent public ignorant enough to buy into his rigid conception of jazz.

These feelings are understandable. With the hefty cultural and economic capital of Lincoln Center at his disposal, Marsalis has, for over 20 years, aggressively propounded a jazz canon that excludes nearly all of the musicians who formed the avant-garde jazz movement in New York.³⁴ Moreover, the issue of institutionalism lies at the crux of the LES scene's overwhelming opposition to Marsalis and JALC. The massive stone and glass edifices of Lincoln Center's main site on Columbus Ave project grandeur, permanence, and abundance. Opened in the early 1960s, Lincoln Center was part of urban planner Robert Moses' "urban renewal" projects. In the mid-50s, the City used the power of eminent domain to clear most of the San Juan Hill neighborhood, a poor area with a black majority population. The area was renamed "Lincoln Square" (Roth 2001:462–463). From its founding to 2004, JALC shared facilities that had originally been built for performances in the European tradition of "high" arts: symphonic concerts, ballet, theater, and operas. In 2004, JALC moved several blocks southeast to its own quarters in the Frederick P. Rose Hall. This complex is housed in the Time Warner Center, a sleek glass-enclosed skyscraper at the intersection of Broadway and W 60th St. The Rose Hall complex includes several performance rooms, with acoustics specifically designed for jazz

³⁴ There is often a veiled charge of Tomism (the idea that Marsalis willfully plays the role of a servile African American for a white audience) in the criticisms of Marsalis by both black *and* white participants in the LES scene. See Gray (2005:32–51) and Porter (2002:287–334) for thorough and even-handed critiques of the politics of representation, race, and cultural hierarchy at work in Lincoln Center's "canonical project" (Gray's term). While they don't level the charge of "Uncle Tom" against Marsalis, they do expose the ways both his vision of jazz and his structural position at Lincoln Center play affirm a rightist celebration of American exceptionalism.

according to Marsalis' aesthetics and ideology. The "home" Marsalis found for *his* music is one of the most expansive and luxurious possible within the U.S. culture industry. Marsalis' success in finding institutional support for (his vision of) jazz, and the top-down economic flow of that support, contrast with the history of efforts by New York avant-garde jazz musicians to form organizations and institutions that would give them control over the means of their cultural production.³⁵

In architecture, scope, and interior design, as well as in musical style, JALC is antithetical to the LES scene, and in particular to its standard-bearing institution, AFA. Lincoln Center is the product of state-initiated gentrification underwritten by big capital; a key facet of AFA's institutional profile is *resistance* to gentrification and capital. Following the historical thread of JALC back to the origins of Lincoln exposes a bitter irony. In his work as an arbiter of jazz and its boundaries, Marsalis has in large part been motivated by a sincere desire – and I believe it is sincere – to obtain recognition for black culture. Yet the conditions of possibility for his project arose from the rubble of a demolished black neighborhood. The copy on JALC's website quotes Marsalis: "The

³⁵ The musicians closely affiliated with the Vision Festival are not the only New York jazz musicians who feel frustration, cynicism or resentment towards Marsalis' commercial success, institutional backing, and prescriptive agenda for jazz. Nor are jazz musicians the sole actors within jazz art worlds to issue devastating critiques of Marsalis' hegemonic position. Jazz critics began problematizing the "Marsalis/Crouch" school of jazz conservatism while Marsalis and Crouch were themselves formulating it during the 1980s. Jazz scholars Scott DeVeaux and Ronald Radano were among the first to note Marsalis' role in efforts to consolidate a top-down master narrative of jazz history (DeVeaux 1991; Radano 1993). As "jazz studies" began to define itself as an interdisciplinary field around the same time that Lincoln Center founded its jazz program, it is not surprising that both Marsalis and JALC have figured heavily in the intellectual conversations of the field (e.g., Gabbard 1995a; Gabbard 1995b; Peretti 1997). The PBS documentary *Jazz* (Burns 2000), for which Marsalis served as musical consultant, caused a groundswell of critique among jazz scholars from various disciplines (Jacques 2001; Kelley 2001; Lipsitz 2004; Pond 2003; Stanbridge 2004; Symposium: On Ken Burns's "Jazz" 2002). In the Conclusion of the dissertation, I discuss the ongoing and broader ramifications of what I think of as the "Marsalis/Burns backlash" moment in jazz studies.

whole space is dedicated to the feeling of swing, which is a feeling of extreme coordination... Everything is integrated: the relationship between one space and another, the relationship between the audience and the musicians, is one fluid motion, because that's how our music is" (History n.d. <http://www.jalc.org/history/>). No rough edges here.

2.5 Good Vibes: On the Nomadism of Jazz Venues

In August 2009, during another of our many rambling discussions, Yuko Otomo and Steve Dalachinsky complicated the nostalgia for the Old Knitting Factory that circulates within the scene and expressed skepticism towards many scene members' wish to find a home for the music. Yuko argued that any experimental art, *by definition*, did not have a "home." In her view, to be experimental, an art form had to be rootless, pushed to the edges of society, accepted by only a select few. Once any music scene settled into a comfortable venue or networks of venues, the restless creative edge upon which the scene thrived began to dull. In their view, the avant-jazz scene at the Old Knitting Factory, when it was happening, was just coincidence. They fondly recalled the experiences of listening to Charles Gayle, Daniel Carter and other improvisers, but they challenged the idea that the Knitting Factory was a "home" for avant-jazz from 1987 to 1994. Yuko and Steve alternated statements, building the argument that people who waxed nostalgic about the Old Knitting Factory and even about Tonic were simplifying matters. They began to rattle off the names of LES bars, cafes, and clubs that opened, featured "out" jazz for a while, and then vanished. It was as though they were describing the ebb and flow of the tide, neither callous nor sympathetic. Neutral.

Then Yuko brought up a venue that was closer to her heart: “The best experience, the most privileged I felt that I was there, at the moment when it happened, was at Ray Taylor’s Living Room.” They both began to recall a series of performances hosted by a squatter named Ray Taylor during the summer of 1989.³⁶ Yuko spoke fondly about the intimacy of the performances. For her, the ephemerality of this venue made the music of that summer more special.

Steve interrupted with some of his typical hard-bitten realism: “The point of what Yuko’s saying—you could feel intimate because five people showed up, or ten people, cause no one cared that much then, as they do now. But the reality is, that was nothing too. The guy ran a series. He was a junky who sold drugs, we found out later. It was a squat. He died. They chased everybody out of that building; I don’t know what it is now.” Though he was being unsentimental about the circumstances of the series, the shows were important to Steve, too. The poems he wrote while listening at the gigs appear in his book of poems written for Charles Gayle. He even titled the book, *The Final Nite*, after one of these poems (see Dalachinsky 2006:23–38).

Yuko resumed her reminiscence: “But what I’m saying is, if that was a venue, it came and went. But what happened was an *amazing* amazing experience...Charles still had a really *hot* approach, and William was still very shy...and the European people hadn’t found them yet, and they were really poor...and the music was so incredible. *Unbelievable*. Steve wrote some great poems.”

³⁶ For the series, Taylor named his “club” – the ground floor of the building in which he squatted – the “Living Room.”

Alternating with interjections from Steve, Yuko recollected the multisensory richness of those nights at Taylor's squat. She remembered the dim, warm light of candles (because the building had no electricity), the balmy summer-night breeze, the moon in the night sky, and the intense, rugged music of these two avant-jazz masters. "...everyone was pushed to the corner, but they were still doing something. That's the strength of this music. As Charles likes to say, it's a *hungry* music...it was such an on-the-edge situation, whenever they made music, there was no reason for it *except to make music*."

Steve moved the conversation back to venues in general. He contrasted avant-garde jazz with previous periods in jazz. Swing had the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem; bebop had Minton's in Harlem and then 52nd St; Birdland had been named for Charlie Parker; the Village Vanguard had been programming the post-bop mainstream for decades. But, Steve noted, "Nobody ever opened a club *just* for avant-garde jazz. And regardless of what people say the Knitting Factory didn't open for avant-garde jazz, Tonic didn't open for avant-garde jazz."

§

As of late-2013, three of the five venues I describe in this chapter no longer exist in the form they during 2009 and 2010. The Local 269 closed in mid-2012. Roulette moved to a larger space in Brooklyn in late 2011. The Bowery Poetry Club now shares its space with Duane Park, an upscale burlesque and jazz club.³⁷ The Stone continues to present a music performance schedule in which avant-jazz holds a privileged position. The Brecht Forum continues to host the *Neues Kabarett* series and installments of the

³⁷ BPC gets use of the space only on Sundays and Mondays. The rest of the week belongs to Duane Park.

Music Now! series. AFA continues to present its regular music series, now renamed “Evolving Series,” at the Clemente Soto Velez Center on 107 Suffolk St, where AFA’s administrative office is also located.

As one more closely investigates the history of music (particularly jazz) venues in Manhattan, a history of nomadism comes into focus and gains definition.³⁸ The current transience of jazz venues does not spell imminent doom for jazz now any more than the emergence and disappearance of jazz clubs during the previous seven-plus decades has. But the nomadism created by these performance conditions and transient systems of patronage helps participants in the LES avant-jazz scene reproduce the feelings of marginality, of struggle against a disinterested political economy of neoliberalism. These feelings and ideas are large enough to contain the multiplicity of musical styles and finer variations of ideological positioning that coexist, sometimes contentiously, within the scene. Participants in the LES scene can agree upon their shared affinity for the marginal in both aesthetic/formal and social domains. When musicians and listeners reproduce variations on the trope of jazz’s precarious health, they share their concern over the uncertain future of improvisatory music making that does not seek mass distribution. They fortify feelings of solidarity – though the going is (and seemingly has always been) tough, they are in this together.

§

³⁸ Burke’s *Come in and Hear the Truth* provides a cultural history of W 52nd St as a hub of jazz activity during the 1930s and 1940s. Figures 3 & 4 in the book (pp. 214-15) illustrate that even while the commercial presentation of live music *thrived* on a two-block stretch of 52nd St, many individual clubs appeared and disappeared.

2 Nov 2011 – Durham, North Carolina

It has been months since I spoke with Steve and Yuko and over a year since I saw them in person. From my mobile phone, I dial their house line (they own a mobile phone but rarely turn it on) to finally follow up on voicemail Steve left me about a month ago. Yuko answers. We start catching up on things.

I ask her what's new in the scene. She says that the 2011 Vision Festival was not as fulfilling as previous ones had been. Too many of the same musicians play it year after year. She says I caught a kind of "end of history" of the scene back when I did fieldwork. The Stone has good music, but it's really not a home for avant-jazz. She notes that Roulette has moved to Brooklyn. It still has good programming but "it's becoming more official, more a 'new music' place." She thinks the scene in Brooklyn is different from the one rooted on the Lower East Side.

"There's no place for the music," Yuko tells me.

Chapter 3

Public Listening: Displays of Aurality and Performances of the Jazz Tradition

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 dealt with a music performance in a community garden. However, most of the LES scene's live performances take place indoors, in the kinds of venues that I explored in Chapter 2. I described a set of venues that I considered central to the LES scene in 2009 and 2010, and I argued that rough edges, whether they were visual, tactile, or conceptual, could be found in each venue. But what about the performances that take place *within* those venues? This chapter considers several social events in which music represents the most obvious, but not the only, form of performance. The specific events or moments discussed here exemplify broader patterns of social interaction and improvisatory musical practices. They also illuminate the aesthetics and ethics that participants in the LES avant-jazz scene reproduce.

Within and around these sonic performances I highlight and explore other multi-sensory performances that occur within different registers of social practices. These *unofficial* performances interact with and are often spurred on by the *official* (musical) performance in progress. Avant-jazz performances often combine media and art forms in a single event. Relatedly, some LES-scene listeners have a penchant for expressing their responses to avant-jazz through other art forms. One example of this is Steve Dalachinsky, who often writes while sitting in the audience and listening to music.

Dalachinsky continues a long tradition of “jazz poetry” that reaches back to Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance writers. Jazz poets are those who have tried to communicate something about their experiences of listening to jazz, whether they do this by crafting a poetic style that emulates or mimics their perception of the rhythmic style of jazz, or by writing poems that describe jazz musicians or performances. Another example is visual artist Jeff Schlanger, who paints in response to avant-jazz improvisation, and whom I discuss in greater detail in this chapter. For his part, Schlanger extends a tradition of visual artists, such as Bob Thompson and Ted Joans, who were inspired by and in turn depicted jazz musicians (Phillips 1995:150–165; Saul 2003).

Beat writers and artists inform the inter-arts practices of the 2000s avant-jazz scene in several key ways. While the phrase “Beat generation” is most frequently used to refer to writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the participants in the Beat movement influenced, were influenced by, and collaborated with numerous other experimental American arts scenes of the mid-20th century, such as “avant-garde dance and theater, Neo-Dada art, Abstract Expressionism, American independent film, California Assemblage, Fluxus, and Happenings” (Phillips 1995:33). Bohemian cafes and bars in lower Manhattan facilitated this cross-pollination of art forms. A notable example was the Five Spot Cafe, which frequently featured jazz performances and served as a favorite haunt of experimental painters and writers (Kelley 1999:137, ff.).

While the (mostly white) Beat writers were finding inspiration in aspects of African American culture - jazz in particular - the Black Arts movement of the 1960s promoted expression across media and art forms. The mutual inspiration between jazz

and creative writing was exemplified in the figure of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), who identified as a Beat early in his career and then became a spearhead of Black Arts. Baraka championed avant-garde jazz in his criticism and read poetry with jazz musicians (Robinson 2005; Thomas 1995). In Chicago, the AACM presented performances that combined music, dance, and theater. Some AACM members saw this multi-arts approach as quintessentially African American, as there was already a long tradition of black performers mixing media in single events (Lewis 2008:151–154).

Physical attitude, stance, and gestures use the body as the medium of communication in a way (other than the obvious example of dance). In addition to encoding aural experience in the written word and the visual or tactile representation, embodied listening constitutes a strategy of externalizing listening, of making it perceivable and knowable to other listeners present. For such messages to be comprehensible to other listeners or to musicians in the public setting of live performance, there must be a syntax or code to bodily movement and attitude.

I explore these moments in order to reveal the complex webs of representation and interpretation woven during each live music performance. How do avant-jazz musicians present themselves to an audience of initiates, many of whom they know personally? How do listeners perform back to the musicians as well as to each other? What kinds of messages – including but also beyond and around the musical sound that the audience has congregated to hear – are communicated by the performers during these moments? What are the valuations that LES avant-jazz scene participants place upon live

musical performances? What kinds of information do musical performances *themselves* convey about the listening practices and acoustemology of the scene?¹

An overarching goal of this study is to support the argument that music listening is an inherently social practice, that any individual's perceptions of musical sound, though they may strike the listener as subjective and arising from within, are fundamentally shaped by one's social position, personal history, and continually mediated by social interactions. If listening is inherently social, then it would follow that humans *perform* listening in various ways. In my interpretation of performed moments of listening, I draw upon music scholarship that understands music perception as socially mediated and attends to the ways that embodied listening practices make aurality public.²

3.2 Public Performances of Listening I: Joe McPhee at the Local 269

4 May 2009 – *The Local 269*

¹ Steven Feld develops the notion of “acoustemology” as a sonically-based alternative to “epistemologies” that privilege the sense of sight as a means for understanding and knowing place (Feld 1996). If “epistemology” refers to a theory of knowledge, in coining “acoustemology,” Feld is concerned with how one can *know* through hearing. I use “acoustemology” here to foreground the sonic and the aural in LES scene members' senses of social reality.

² Some ethnomusicologists have studied practices of the body that form part of specific music cultures. These practices render individuals' listening experiences, bringing aural perception out into the open and making it public. Judith Becker (2004) explores practices of trancing when listening to music, highlighting how such practices externalize subjectivity; Greg Downey (2002) argues that Brazilian *capoeira*, a hybrid of dance and martial arts, both teaches participants how to “hear” through their limbs and torsos and how to then communicate the sensations they feel when hearing music. Ethnomusicologists and anthropologists studying the senses have attended to the ways that aural perception is determined by the discourses of history, culture and place. In addition to Feld's concept of “acoustemology” (Feld 1996) other examples of this work include Erlmann (2004), Gray (2013), and Novak (2013). For a useful overview of ethnographies focused upon sound, see (Samuels et al. 2010). This article includes further discussion of and references in these areas of study.

Soon after I arrive at the Local 269, I say hello to Brad Farberman, who's running the door this night. He tells me to look around; there are a lot of jazz journalists present. The crowd is a good size for RUCMA shows – maybe 25 or 30 people – mainly white men, most of them over fifty years old. Visual artists Alan Bolle and Jeff Schlanger have both set up their work stations, Bolle at his elevated perch on the left side of the room, Schlanger front and center in a chair, hunching over his large sketchbook. Schlanger sits close to Joe McPhee, who is playing both sets of tonight's RUCMA show. I remember that I first met Schlanger at another McPhee performance earlier in the spring. It occurs to me that he is in the midst of a phase of painting and drawing McPhee.

McPhee has brought a few saxophones to this gig; he mostly plays his alto during this first set. Once McPhee begins playing the audience quickly becomes quiet. From my usual spot at the back of the room, I watch the scene. I notice some nodding heads in the audience. A few in the crowd are jotting things down in notebooks, on pieces of paper. James Keepnews, a guitarist and AFA stalwart who will participate in the night's second set, a collective improvisation led by McPhee, shakes his head in affirmation of McPhee's playing and grimaces with pleasure.³ It's a kind of visual analog to the linguistic inversions typical of African American slang and social poetics, such as the phrase "It

³ Keepnews was characteristically extroverted in his responses from the audience. At the many avant-jazz shows that we both attended, I frequently observed him wince, grimace, shake his head in intense aural pleasure. He also shouted encouragement during and after solos in a consistently loud and robust manner, very much in keeping with longstanding jazz cultural practices of audience interaction by means of cheering on the performing musicians. Notably, all of Keepnews' interjections fell within the boundaries of forms of audience noise that are permissible, as they were vocal and audible signs of his appreciation of the music.

hurts so good!", praising a performance by saying it was "*bad*," flipping the connotations of the word "funk" from negative to positive, et al.⁴

I notice the prominence of dynamic contrasts in McPhee's playing tonight. At one moment he's blowing air through his saxophone, letting the instrument merely act as a resonator in amplifying his breath; he works key clicks into the texture, little clean punctuations of the flow of air. Then McPhee slings rippling melismas and screeches into the highest register of the alto. The combination of McPhee's playing solo and the audience's respectful silence helps the silences he inserts play an active role in his musical flow. There is loud applause after this first improvisation.

For the second improvisation, McPhee begins by blowing wind through the horn. As the air velocity increases, he pushes a few pitches out. His lips exert just enough pressure, combined with the force of the air, to make the reed vibrate. The notes sound/feel squeezed out; I imagine McPhee trying to find precisely the point at which embouchure and wind engage the reed to produce a tone. From this ruminative exploration of the fine line dividing amplified breath and pitched sound, McPhee moves into slow, rubato melodies.

Everyone else in the room is quiet. I scribble something about the "stillness tonight" in my notebook. The plain, relatively quiet musical texture McPhee creates highlights the audience's *reverent* silence. There is a doubly reciprocal motion between

⁴ See (1972) and Major (1994) for reference sources on African American slang. Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) is perhaps the most canonical work in a larger body of scholarship that theorizes how semantic inversion and other rhetorical/performative tropes comprise part of a broader set of expressive modes in African American life.

McPhee's silences and the audience's. We are reciprocating the concentration of his playing with our silence, allowing the spaces between his phrases to stand out. Our lack of verbal utterance and our physical stillness help McPhee define the flexible hypermeter of his improvisation through his purposive use of pauses and omission. Without our voluntary silence, the lines he chooses to play would not be complemented by the pauses he leaves in between.

As his phrases continue, I hear references to the melodic style of black spirituals refracted through the avant-jazz lens: the continuum of spiritual jazz from John Coltrane to Albert Ayler to Frank Wright to McPhee, others in between. He's employing a wide vibrato; he inflects arrival points in his melodies with quick ornaments, grace notes. The harmonic language McPhee uses as he moves into these spiritual lines emphasizes triads. His saxophone lines resemble a singer's voice. I am reminded of the way writers, subsequent musicians, and listeners talk about Coltrane's playing sounding like a singing black preacher (Cole 1976; Nisenson 1993; Porter 1997; Thomas 1976). McPhee is tapping into and continuing this tradition. He's defining a slow tempo, stretching it out as he pleases. Vague remembrances of soul jazz saxophonists from 1960s Blue Note albums, even a bluesy sax part from something like a Luther Vandross ballad, flit through my mind's ear. McPhee is "code-switching" within the continuum of African American saxophone styles, moving from abstract, dissonant material into more diatonic territory.

Every now and then McPhee blows harder, making his lines louder and his timbre brighter and more cutting; then he'll follow with a digression into ambiguous harmonic fields aided by false fingerings. Yet in between these harmonic, timbral, and melodic

departures (which grow in duration to become dominant music-stylistic strains rather than “digressions”), McPhee shifts to return to the slow, triadic melody-flow he’s been intermittently working for several minutes. He ends this improvisation with a truncated recapitulation of the amplified wind material with which he began, emphasizing the piece’s loose but definite form. The audience’s loud applause indicates their positive valuation of this improvisation. McPhee tells us that it was titled “Old Eyes” and is dedicated to Ornette Coleman. McPhee’s announcement pays respect to a living legend of the jazz avant-garde and offers the audience a way to interpret the improvisation they have just heard. McPhee just placed himself, or *reaffirmed* his existing spot, within the tradition of the jazz avant-garde. Among these informed listeners, McPhee’s dedication will most likely spur on momentary aural memories of Coleman’s saxophone sound, particular performances or recordings by Coleman, etc. The dedication, then, is also a compact performance of tradition.

Scanning the audience, I see a lot of closed eyes in the audience. Bruce Gallanter sits near the front of the audience, his head bowed forward, eyes tightly shut. His is an attitude not only of concentration or focus, but also of reverence. Bruce is the co-owner of the Downtown Music Gallery, and an avid listener.⁵ On this May evening, Gallanter is aware of his visibility within the crowd. Listeners who live in the New York metropolitan area and come to hear performances of avant-jazz will almost certainly have visited DMG at least once. Gallanter’s listening attitude most likely helps him concentrate on the

⁵ Downtown Music Gallery (hereafter referred to as DMG) is a record store that has heavily featured recordings of avant-jazz and other experimental music styles that emerged in Downtown Manhattan since the 1960s.

nuances of McPhee's sounds. By shutting out external visual stimuli he can focus more attention on aural stimuli. By adjusting his body's posture and tilting his face – the crucial nexus of sensory input – downward, he can reinforce his intention to be contemplative and attentive. Bruce's physical comportment, the way he controls his body during this listening act, also marks his connoisseurship to others in the Local 269. His physical performance of reverence gives outward, empirical evidence of an interior attitude, of an embrace of interiority itself. Gallanter wants to hear McPhee and take in the latter's music deeply, but the ways he uses his body during this auditory act mean that his veteran listener status will be recognized.

§

Avid jazz listeners want to be there for the moment of creation, the live improvised musical event. They want to listen closely to the musical thoughts of artists whom they respect and valorize; they want to hear these musicians thinking in avant-jazz, to bear witness to intellectual/emotional/spiritual interiority projected outward in sound. They want to bring their interiorities into contact with those of the musicians and other listeners, to experience an interiority that paradoxically gains intensity from its grounding in social and/or public situations of performance and audition that enable a shared feeling of “we-ness.”⁶ What could be more intimate than listening to the innermost thoughts and feelings of another human as they take musical shape and form? If listening closely and

⁶ Alfred Schütz (1976) proposes that the experience of music audition creates a sense of “we-ness” among listeners at live performances. Tom Porcello (1998) argues for a more inclusive conception of the ways in which aural experience can facilitate feelings of co-presence and “we-ness” among groups of music participants (including listeners).

deeply to a great improviser is a private act, as Steve Dalachinsky, Yuko Otomo, Matthew Shipp, and others have told me, why would people seek out community for these introverted aesthetic experiences? Why would someone want to be sure to engage in this most private of social acts in a congregational setting?

The symbolic value of close listening increases in the social realm. Though dedicated listeners ascribe importance to the interiority and privacy of listening, they want fellow listeners to know they have done that work. An important part of the practice of listening might be close aural study in one's domestic listening spaces – a meditative kind of activity – but the life cycle of the listening practice would be incomplete without instances of listening in social settings. Listening in co-presence allows for assessments of other listeners, as well as assessments of the music being performed. How are other people reacting to the music? In what ways does their listening register on their bodies? Co-present listening also plays a crucial role in the pedagogy of listening. The novice listener learns to differentiate mediocre from exemplary jazz by watching, listening to, and perceiving the reactions of other listeners, by listening to the evaluative talk of listeners with more experience.⁷

⁷ Shannon (2003) analyzes similar social dynamics in the intersubjective creation of “tarab” during performances of Arab music in Syria: “By displaying tarab responses, listeners demonstrate to others, and to themselves, that they are capable of being moved emotionally by music, which is a valued attribute of the self for many Aleppine artists and music lovers” (82). Musicians and listeners are capable of distinguishing expert from uncultivated listeners by judging externalized, embodied responses to music.

3.21 Performing Images in Response to Musical Performance

Another member of the audience at the Joe McPhee solo gig makes the labor of listening visible through different strategies. If Bruce Gallanter performs his listening through dedicated concert attendance and embodied gesture and attitude during performances, Jeff Schlanger has been performing his listening for decades through his drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Through skillful discursive strategies, Schlanger encourages the interpretation that his artistic work indexes a profound and sensitive musical ear. In talk and in print, Schlanger defines his visual art as a way of applauding the music at a live performance. In addition, Schlanger performs his listener with his body while painting/drawing: he holds paintbrushes or pens in both hands and fills a canvas or large sheet of paper. While his hands move, his head nods up and down in small, quick movements as he alternately looks at performers and at his work-in-progress.

The LES avant-jazz community has accepted this interpretation; his worldview is reflected back to him. Treating his listening experiences as creative impetus for his own art, he continually turns his listening efforts into symbolic and real capital. Schlanger places his art within an interpretive frame – a viewer knows that Schlanger has attempted to depict the synesthetic mix of seeing musicians in performance and hearing their music. His mixed-media paintings of avant-jazz performances combine aspects of representational realism (one can clearly make out faces, bodies, instruments) and abstract expressionism (the presence of lines, splatters, and visual gestures that “loosen up” the human figures in his compositions). Figure 6 reproduces a piece he created

during a celebration in honor of Stephanie Stone's birthday, during which Joe McPhee played music while Steve Dalachinsky read a poem.

When I first asked Schlanger, via email, to tell me a bit about how he conceives of his real-time paintings, he replied: "What drives my musicWitness® project is live improvised music. The work is actually a long-term pictographic music-writing transcription, a diary of real-time looking & listening to the whole thing at once, almost the antithesis of talking about music. In fact, painting goes best when shifting up into a non-verbal mode during the listening experience."⁸ Schlanger executes a discursive move that places his interpretive mode - visual representation via drawing and painting - in a privileged relationship to musical sound, while relegating linguistic representation to an inferior position: *In fact, painting goes best when shifting up...* By emphasizing that his art is "almost the antithesis of talking about music," Schlanger taps into a trope – prominent among certain musicians and listeners across musical scenes and genres – that verbal/linguistic communication about one's musical experiences is an inherently losing proposition.

⁸ Email communication, 24 April 2009.

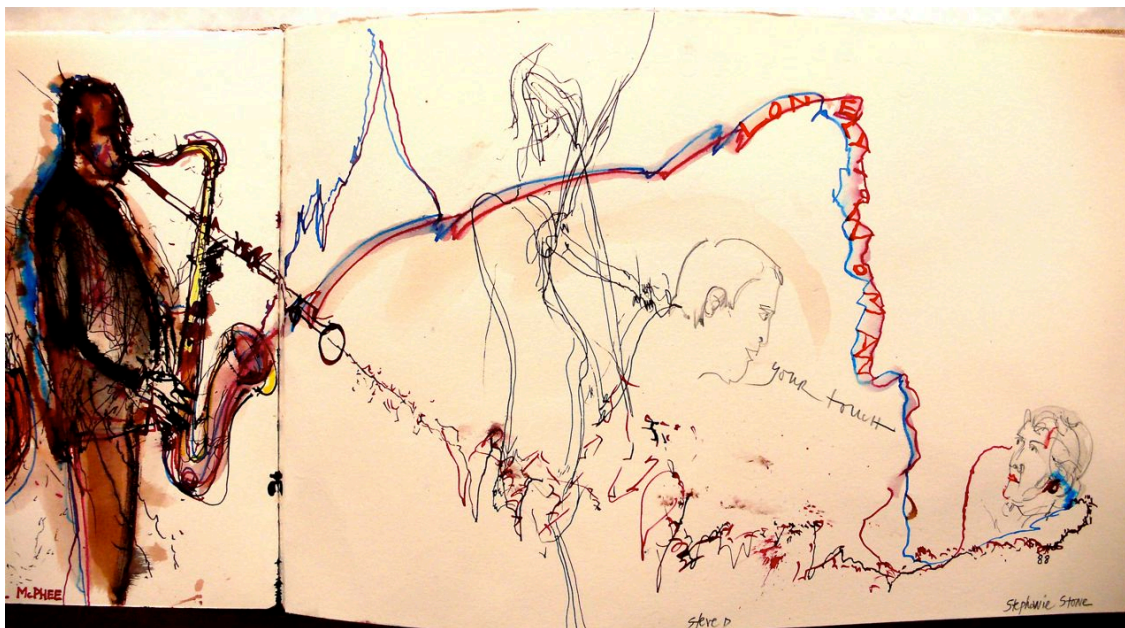


Figure 6. “Your Touch” (2009), copyright by Jeff Schlanger.
 Note that McPhee (left), Dalachinsky (center), and Stone (right) are all labeled in the painting.

Here I am thinking of the countless times musicians have answered, “I like to let the music speak for itself” when asked to talk about their work. The popular quote, of ambiguous origin, that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture” indicates a similar mistrust or suspicion about language’s power to describe musical experience in any satisfactory way. Put in the positive, this is a belief in (or wish for) a fundamental, ontological separation of musical sound and linguistic/social discourse.⁹ Schlanger’s views represent an idiosyncratic adoption of the “aesthetic disposition” that Bourdieu (1984) describes, as it (paradoxically) imbues the fundamental belief in the self-

⁹ Literary scholar and poet Fred Moten says of poetry he wrote while attending avant-jazz performances, “I wanted to figure out a way to write (about) these performances, to record them, without killing them or capturing them” (Moten and Rowell 2004:957). Here Moten similarly invokes the trope that attempting to represent performances with expository or analytical prose risks stifling or altogether losing the aesthetic richness of those performances. Not coincidentally, Moten is an avid fan of the avant-garde jazz and the current-day LES avant-jazz scene.

sufficiency of aesthetics and art with a conviction that artistic production is capable of reflecting and affecting social relations and change.

§

To conduct an informal interview with Jeff Schlanger, I travel via Metro North to New Rochelle, a town within the extensive suburbs of Westchester County, north of New York City. After meeting me on the train platform, he suggests we go to a nearby cafe that is in the heart of New Rochelle's modest downtown. "Steal Away," a 30 x 20 foot mural by Schlanger that depicts tuba player Bob Stewart, adorns the side of the building that houses the cafe. Before we settle in at the cafe, Jeff asks that I take a few photos of him with the mural, to be emailed to him later. As we order food in the cafe, he remarks on a smaller piece of his hanging on the cafe wall, "When she [pianist Connie Crothers] came off the stage - I was set up right in front of the stage right where the musicians went on and off - and she has an extraordinary sensitivity to what I'm doing..."

For much of our conversation, Schlanger praises musicians profusely. In addition to Crothers, he talks about canonical figures of the jazz avant-garde such as Julius Hemphill, Joe McPhee, and Muhal Richard Abrams. One of the ways in which he praises a musician is to say that the musician "really understands" what he, Schlanger, is doing in his artwork. I understand him to be telling me that the musician in question understands that he, Schlanger, isn't merely drawing or painting musicians in performance, but reacting to the musical sounds he hears and representing these reactions in a visual medium. Schlanger tells me that Hemphill understood his visual art before Schlanger himself did.

His observations that certain musicians have a profound understanding of what his art is “about” recalls his description of the musicWitness® project as “a long-term pictographic music-writing transcription, a diary of real-time looking & listening to the whole thing at once, almost the antithesis of talking about music,” a description which I’m certain he has polished over the years. He privileges nonverbal, nonlinguistic modes of human communication and values “creative improvised music” or “jazz” (as he variously calls the musical idiom) because it represents for him an extremely powerful form of nonlinguistic (and implicitly counter-hegemonic) communication. Our talk brings him back around to Muhal Richard Abrams, whom he has already praised as extremely perceptive and knowledgeable. “I’ve gotten responses from Muhal,” Schlanger pauses as he thinks of the right words, “no artist in the history of the human race could have asked for, could have dreamed of...” I ask him if he can think of a specific instance of one of these responses. I want to understand what he means by “responses”: does he mean Abrams’ reaction at seeing a painting Schlanger had completed? Or does Schlanger mean that he and Abrams achieved a trans-media interaction *during* the latter’s music performance, that Abrams responded to Schlanger’s presence and artistic process *while* Abrams was playing?

After a brief pause, he says “I couldn’t put it in a tape recorder. You had to be there.”

Schlanger’s reply not only deflects my question, but also throws the epistemological premises upon which my inquiry was based into doubt. Through implication, he is telling me that in asking for a “specific instance,” a fact of a sort, I am

attempting to understand the communications, the moments of communion, which he's been recalling in distorted form. His charge against the audio recorder is one of reduction; the richness of interpersonal experience about listening to music cannot be conveyed through verbal anecdote.

On the one hand, Schlanger resists the reductive inscription, via linguistic and visual media, of the ephemera of human experience, which involve complicated webs of affect: fleeting thoughts, quick utterances, apprehensions of bodily stance, a look, a hand placed upon a shoulder. In this vein of privileging the totality, immediacy and thus *authenticity* of "live," co-present experience, he talks about the original artwork possessing a power that is lost in all reproductions. Espousing almost to the letter the ideology that Walter Benjamin famously complicates, Schlanger opines that the freshness of the original is absent from all copies.¹⁰ He even applies this belief to his own work, lamenting that his paintings ever have to dry. Yet his livelihood depends upon the continued existence of this residue of experience, these "lesser" copies and representations of ineffable performances. He makes his living off of his paintings, sculptures, and drawings – these objects that are cursed by a crucial lack (according to Schlanger) as much as they bear traces of his listening experiences.

With good cause, Jeff Schlanger praises avant-jazz musicians and speaks passionately about their work. Just as he champions creative improvising musicians during our conversation, experimental jazz circles within New York City have

¹⁰ See Benjamin (1968:217–252). Similar articulations of faith in the "aura" of originals emerged in conversations throughout my fieldwork.

championed his work. Beyond Schlanger's extended collaboration with Julius Hemphill (including five covers he did for Hemphill albums), his paintings and sculptures have appeared as cover art on at least 24 avant-jazz releases.¹¹ His work has been featured in various periodicals and has often appeared on press materials for concerts and music festivals.¹² Jeff enjoys a privileged relationship with William Parker and Patricia Nicholson-Parker, and hence he is given choice locations from which to observe and paint at AFA events. At Vision Fest 2009 I observed Schlanger positioned so close to the stage that his canvas was nearly touching it. The size of Jeff's setup dwarfed those of the other artists doing similar kinds of real-time painting-in-response-to-music.

He tells me that he got into the "whole sculpture, painting thing" because it helps him "listen to the whole thing at once."¹³ Here, too, lies another facet of Schlanger's skillful way of performing his listening: his art allows him to bypass the potential challenge of talking about what he hears. He stakes his reputation, both as an artist and as an expert listener, on his artwork. In so doing, he also gains symbolic capital within the LES avant-jazz scene. In this social milieu that values "creative expression," the *doing* of painting, drawing and sculpting garners him more respect among his fellow artists (other visual artists, poets/writers, and of course avant-jazz musicians) than the *saying* of music criticism and/or scholarship possibly could.

¹¹ <http://www.musicwitness.com/Discography/mWrecordCovers.htm>

¹² <http://www.musicwitness.com/musicWitness.htm>

¹³ In Chapter 5, I discuss another LES scene member espoused the valuation of listening to "the whole thing at once" from a different subject position than the centralized one Schlanger enjoys within the LES scene.

Schlanger peppers our conversation with casual derogations of American academia. He tells me that I should be able to turn in visual and audio material as part of my thesis. I try to explain the obstacles preventing such a scholarly format: the continued logocentrism of the academy, despite a burgeoning interest in digital scholarship; the expenses incurred by publishing copyrighted materials, which would make a university press balk at such a project. He chides the narrow-mindedness of Duke University Press. Later, he quips that academics are “specialists in rigor mortis.” My replies possibly encourage him. I affirm his criticisms of the academy with self-deprecating jokes about scholars, university administration, and the vicissitudes of the academic career – partly genuine expressions of my views and partly a strategy of rapport-building.

Schlanger shows me some of his smaller-scale work in a sketchbook he carries around: a drawing of a Cecil Taylor performance. We start talking about Taylor, and the poetry that he often intersperses with his piano playing. I remark on how much of Taylor’s poetry is “about the sound of words rather than their semantic content” and marvel at the “layers of synesthetic feedback” at work in Schlanger’s drawing his audition of Cecil’s poetic talking/sounding about sound. Excitedly, he says he’s done “a lot of work with poets [pauses] and I love it [pauses] because [longer pause] Duke University doesn’t know it, but this is writing TOO about music!”¹⁴

¹⁴ To this day I am not sure whether Schlanger intended to criticize *both* the American university system *and* the academic publishing industry, or whether he used “Duke University” and “Duke University Press” interchangeably because he considered the academic institution and its Press to be synonymous. Similarly, I have not been able to decide if he referred to “Duke” simply out of expediency, because using it as a metonym for the academic publishing industry was a convenient shorthand in the middle of an unfolding conversation, or because he assumed that since I was a graduate student at Duke, any monograph that would result from my doctoral research would necessarily be published by the Duke’s press.

Schlanger's skepticism of academics and journalists was a popular view among artists (including creative writers and musicians) in the scene. They view the act of "writing about" as inherently lesser in comparison to the act of "doing." In Schlanger's case, as with other listeners in the LES scene, personal passions mix with a desire for social recognition. Schlanger's musicWitness® project blurs the ostensible distinctions of consumption and production, as it externalizes the interiority and subjectivities of himself and the musicians he depicts. Paradox animates the relationship between his artwork and his words. He crafts a public persona of an artist who transcends the mundanity of the linguistic, yet he encourages this interpretation of his work *through* verbal and written language. Employing a rhetoric influenced by the Romantic notion that artistic production occurs during inspired moments of creativity that transcend the phenomenal world and its trappings of the social, he reifies his aural experience and trades it as a commodity.

When Jeff Schlanger compliments the musicians he depicts in his visual and plastic art, he also praises himself. The implied message nestled within Schlanger's praise of Connie Crothers' sensitivity and Muhal Richard Abrams' reactions to his real-time drawing/painting is an authentication of his own listening skills: not only does he possess the aural sensitivity and intellectual curiosity necessary to hear and interpret their music at a deep level, but he also is able to reciprocate by giving aesthetic expression to his listening experiences.

3.3 Performing the Jazz Tradition: Matthew Shipp at Tribes

14 March 2010 - A Gathering of the Tribes

Walking up the rickety steps in the hallway of 285 E. 3rd Street, I hear voices coming from the 2nd floor. It's about 4:40pm, and Matthew Shipp is supposed to begin at 5:00. I am a bit surprised to hear so many people hanging out this far in advance of the performance. I figure that people who have come to hear Shipp play will start straggling in at about 5:00, and that in actuality the performance won't get started until close to 5:30. Then again, I've never been inside "Tribes" before.

I open the door and see a young white woman, in her mid- to late-20s, seated on a stool near the doorway. "You here for the Shipp performance?" She's working the door, collecting the cover charge.

"Yeah." I look around quickly as I pull out my wallet. I'm looking at a kind of living room with white walls upon which hang a bunch of paintings – some fairly large. The room is crowded with people, many white, mostly in or around middle age. Two black men who appear to be in late middle age sit across from one another at a coffee table. They both smoke cigarettes. I figure one of them must be Steve Cannon. Steve Dalachinsky and Yuko Otomo have told me he's a blind black man who usually has a cigarette in his hand.

"Okay, so it's fifteen dollars."

"Right." I hand her the money and take a few steps further into the place. I look to my left and see a large rectangular room with about 30 folding chairs set up. At the far

end of the room is a beat-up black upright piano. I feel disoriented once again. Matthew Shipp is going to perform on this rickety old piano?

I walk into this rectangular room and see Steve and Yuko. I say hello. Yuko tells me she's sick – hung over. She's quieter and less gregarious than usual. We're settling ourselves to sit in the front rows of chairs; I slowly take off my jacket, she puts down her bag. Dalachinsky, after milling about, going into other rooms, comes back to the front row. Through bits and spurts of talk from both of them, I gather that Steve and Yuko went to two parties the previous night. The second party was at a nightclub, and Yuko feels that, in addition to the booze and pot, the bad vibes of the place helped cause her current condition. Shipp joins our conversation, asks Yuko how she's doing. I jokingly ask him if he's hung over as well.

“Me? No! Definitely not. I don't drink.”

“Oh, okay,” I reply with some embarrassment. He doesn't sound defensive so much as emphatic. I begin to remember that, during a previous conversation we had, he mentioned that he quit drinking years ago.

“I used to be hung over a lot. But no, no – not at ALL hung over by a long shot.” His words are quick, sometimes staccato, as is typical of Shipp's verbal delivery. A bit nervous, his speech can feel almost brusque at times. Yet the overall effect is not standoffish.

Feeling a bit nervous, I ask him the occasion for this solo performance.

“Oh, Steve Cannon wanted to make money.”

“Oh, so like a favor?”

“Yeah...basically I agreed to play so he could raise some money.”

“—like a benefit?”

“—yeah, a benefit.”

A short while later, most of the seats in the room are occupied. In addition, several people stand at the back of the room in order to hear Shipp’s solo set. Steve Dalachinsky rises from his seat and begins to introduce the event. Dalachinsky plugs Shipp a bit, mentions that he’s been listening to Shipp and Bill Evans in alternation, as a kind of listening experiment, repeating to everyone assembled some of what he told me in conversation several minutes before. “...and it’s because of this guy,” he says as he puts his hand on my head.

Once introduced by Dalachinsky, Steve Cannon stands at the front of the room and somewhat ramblingly explains that he has a “special surprise” for everyone. He’s known Matt Shipp for years and values his musicianship and friendship. Shipp’s hometown of Wilmington, Delaware made Cannon think of the great jazz musician from Wilmington: trumpeter Clifford Brown. This in turn got Cannon thinking about Richie Powell, younger brother of Bud Powell and the pianist of the Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet. Somehow Cannon moves from musing on this regional jazz history to the dance team the Nicholas Brothers, who appeared in the 1943 musical film *Stormy Weather* (Stone 2005). His “special surprise” is to treat all of us in the audience to the Nicholas Brothers’ celebrated dance routine in the film. Dalachinsky cues up the DVD of the film to the appropriate scene. We’re looking at a television old enough to be driven by a cathode ray tube; it looks to be a 25-inch screen and sits on an audio-video rolling cart,

positioned next to the upright piano. Dalachinsky's chatty introduction of Cannon and the latter's casual introduction of the Nicholas Brothers clip create the sense that everyone in the room knows one another.

The audience at Tribes exclaims loudly, laughs, and cheers at the *Stormy Weather* clip. They marvel at the acrobatics and élan of the Nicholas Brothers. These loud verbalizations make the space seem intimate. I feel like I'm at a party private in someone's living room, about to listen to a friend perform. I remember Steve and Yuko's fond descriptions of listening to Charles Gayle and William Parker perform in Ray Taylor's squat. As we sit and laugh with each other and enjoy the Nicholas Brothers, I imagine the room resembles exactly what Cannon wanted Tribes to be when he formed it in his home. It recalls salons from previous artistic and intellectual avant-gardes: the modernist salons of the early 20th century, those of the Beat movement, the performance spaces of the Black Arts movement, and the lofts and gallery spaces of 1970s SoHo. Cannon, Dalachinsky, and the other members of the audience are performing this sense of familiarity and intimacy, in part because most of them *do* know each other relatively well. We are among kindred spirits. So we cheer away, laugh out loud, and voice our appreciation of this classic example of African-American dance.

The number ends and Dalachinsky stops the DVD. Cannon says something like, "It's my pleasure to present Matthew Shipp." Within a few seconds Shipp has briskly walked up to the piano, sat down, and attacked the keys.

Shipp wears a black t-shirt and worn-out blue jeans. As soon as he sits on the bench, arpeggio-like figures issue from the piano. No moment of silence before the

performance, no deep breath. He's building a dark, mid- to low-register ostinato texture with these arpeggios. It feels urgent, crackling with pent-up energy, as if Shipp had wound himself up and is now springing forth into pianistic sound. Soon he digresses from the ostinato/arpeggio/process-music texture into freer, more rhapsodic gestures and ideas. As he continues to play, he tosses in boppish right-hand melodies. Steve and Yuko sit to my left; next to me on the right side is Nicole, a native of France, a singer-painter- cook-jack of all trades-aesthete who knows Steve & Yuko. Later this afternoon I will recall meeting her at the Stone perhaps a year ago when Dalachinsky performed a duo set with drummer Jim Pugliesi. Nicole sat in and sang a bit with them. Now she holds a small sketchpad and appears to be drawing a likeness of Shipp as he plays. Like others in the scene, she engages in an expressive form while witnessing a performance of improvised music. She taps into the trope of documentarian listening - drawing, writing, or filming during a live performance in order to record and portray one's aesthetic experience of and reaction to live music - expertly wielded by Jeff Schlanger, Steve Dalachinsky, and other visual artists, writers and videographers who make it their business to produce culture in reaction to music culture.¹⁵

Shipp interpolates the standard "Fly Me to the Moon" into a dissonant texture he's been mulling over. I look left and glance at Dalachinsky; he has recognized the tune. He mouths the lyrics, his face mimes a dreamy look (eyes upward, brow raised a bit), his hands mimic flapping wings. Shipp refers back to "Fly Me to the Moon" in between

¹⁵ In the next chapter, I further analyze what I call "documentarian impulses" as part of the *habitus* of listening co-produced by LES-scene participants.

excursions into harmonically dissonant territory, all the while maintaining the musical flow and sense of forward motion. He begins to play through the chord progression of “Fly Me” in the style of a Bach two-part invention. His eighth-note feel has become more “straight” and he nimbly navigates the harmonic sequence-based progression of the song, highlighting how well “Fly Me” lends itself to an “a la Bach” approach.

As Shipp continues, my attention floats in and out of close, moment-by-moment listening. I will focus on trying to remember what happened before the performance began, the conversations I held. Then something Shipp plays will pull my consciousness back to the musical flow at hand. He’s grunting and humming a bit while playing. At times he stamps hard on the sustain pedal and I can hear the resulting thud. It’s about now that I notice how lousy the piano sounds. Many of the keys yield notes that are not only out of tune but also decay with a metallic, clangy sound almost like a quick spring reverb. The piano produces a thin, at times almost distorted tone; Shipp cannot coax much sustain or resonance from the instrument. I watch his body from my position directly in back of him. He sits, hunched over the keys, about five feet in front of me. He rocks a bit, the grunting and humming continue. His arms and fingers move quickly, continuous motion from his body forming an analogue to the continuous sonic motion of the music he’s playing. When he hits the duds of the keyboard I see no hesitation, nor any kind of fussing about the bad key. He doesn’t seem to look at the keyboard, doesn’t avoid the keys in worse shape. He doesn’t really seem to care about the condition of the piano.

Shipp interpolates “My Funny Valentine” into a passage robust with dissonance and loud figures. Some folks in the audience chuckle at the ironically-placed quotation. A

bit later, when Shipp works “Autumn Leaves” into the ongoing improvisation, I notice that both Dalachinsky and Nicole catch the tune. Steve raises his head and opens his eyes – almost as if awoken from a trance by his recognition of the standard. We shoot each other a look and quick grin. Nicole begins to lip-sync the lyrics to the tempo of Shipp’s rendition of the song. Her lip-syncing at times veers into a barely-audible (even to me sitting right next to her) quasi-pitched whispering of the lyrics. Shipp subjects “Autumn Leaves” to some of the Bachian counterpoint.

Later on, when Shipp slips in a bit of “C-Jam Blues,” both Dalachinsky and Nicole laugh loudly enough to rise above the *fortissimo* of Shipp’s piano. The tune itself is a kind of musical joke: Duke Ellington fashioned a 12-bar blues out of an almost comical dearth of melodic material – a riff made up of seven G’s followed by one resolving C. The skeletal melodic profile of the tune makes it conducive to quotation and interpolation – the G-C dyad can be superimposed upon numerous harmonic fields without causing dissonance. Perhaps Steve and Nicole laughed at the incongruity of Shipp’s superimposing this Swing-era blues riff onto the dense, dissonance-laden texture he had been crafting. Perhaps they were laughing *with* Shipp, in a sense, feeling like they were in on the musical joke fueled by this incongruity.

When a jazz musician inserts a quotation of a song during an improvisation, she demonstrates her musicianship, her cleverness in being able to make a foreign melody fit over the current set of chord changes. Quoting another tune for ironic effect became a common practice among bebop musicians. Saxophonist Dexter Gordon in particular became an expert at quotation. For instance, a favorite quotational joke of Gordon’s was

to drolly toss in the melody of Richard Wagner's "Bridal Chorus," from his opera *Lohengrin* (often used for the procession of the bride in U.S. weddings and popularly known as "Here Comes the Bride"), during an up-tempo blues. Shipp's interpolation of "C-Jam Blues" in the midst of an otherwise dissonant and pantonal passage of music does not require the kind of sleight-of-hand typical of quotation in jazz. Yet the performative gesture serves an indexical purpose, as he is referencing the device of quotation - a form of referentiality itself - within the history of jazz. It is a meta-performative moment, an explicit acknowledgment of *this* solo piano set as one jazz performance among countless others.

Shipp finishes and there is strong applause from the 30 to 40 people present. Shipp takes one deep bow and quickly strides "offstage" to the opposite end of the room from the piano. The applause is long enough to elicit an encore. Shipp returns to the piano and gets right back to it. His musical texture is tumultuous, flurries of right-hand figures, booming left hand hits in the piano's low register. Soon, I begin to feel a kind of recognition creeping around the edges of my aural focus. In the sonic ruckus, Shipp is sprinkling in tonal references, shards of diatonic melody. I realize that the tune he's now interpolating is at a breakneck tempo. The tune isn't usually played this fast. My ears are familiar with the contours of the chord progression, but the title remains on the tip of my tongue and out of my reach. What's the damn tune??

"There Will Never Be Another You" - it hits me. Frenetically I scribble the title on a free page of my notepad, and lean to my left to show it to Yuko and Dalachinsky. Yuko looks and gives a vigorous nod. Then Steve looks, squints his eyes, and nods. These are

nods without much surprise – I get the sense that they both had already heard a standard lurking in the sound.

§

In addition to Shipp's performance of a certain notion of the jazz tradition by means of his interpolations of "standards," another performance of tradition permeated this solo set at Tribes. This performance of tradition subsumed Shipp's pianistic performance of jazz historicity, and in this broader yet more implicit performance Steve Cannon was Shipp's collaborator. Through verbal rhetoric, Cannon placed *this* performance within the longer history of African American performing arts. His spoken introduction placed Shipp into a *regional* jazz history in its mention of his fellow Wilmington native, Clifford Brown. By invoking Clifford Brown, Cannon also rehearsed an admiration for the trumpeter that is nearly universal among jazz musicians and enthusiasts. In highlighting the regional heritage Shipp shares with Brown, he articulated Shipp to the same jazz tradition that the memory and persona of Brown inhabits. By placing Shipp within this lineage, Cannon also gestured towards the argument that there is one single jazz tradition.

Cannon's holistic figuration of "the jazz tradition" was given further definition by his presentation of the *Stormy Weather* excerpt. Not only did Shipp have something to do with Clifford Brown, but they both also had something to do with the Nicholas Brothers, Cab Calloway, Lena Horne, Fats Waller, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who all appear in *Stormy Weather*. The 1943 film featured an unusual number of African American performers prominent in United States popular media at the time. Though Cannon did

not provide a clear verbal explanation of why he wanted to share the “Jumpin’ Jive” dance number from *Stormy Weather* as a prelude to Matthew Shipp, this very act of juxtaposition made his point and gave an explanation to those in the audience who were familiar with the film and the numerous black musicians it features. Cannon reminded us that Shipp’s cultural production exists within a long, proud history of African American performance. Notably, in its juxtaposition of acting, music, and dance (portrayed on film, yet another medium), the clip also celebrated the tradition of inter-arts performance in African American culture.

Shipp’s inclusion of standards was a gesture of “traditioning” – an example of how tradition is something people do, and not only a coagulation of past practices, events, and memories into the conceptual object of a “tradition.”¹⁶ Shipp’s interpolation of jazz standards was neither a new nor unusual aspect of his playing that day. Sprinkled among the numerous recordings he has released since the late 1980s are renditions of jazz standards like “Summertime,” “C-Jam Blues,” or “Someday My Prince Will Come.” Shipp is not alone among experimental or avant-garde jazz musicians in his propensity to refer back to “the tradition;” jazz avant-gardists sometimes play the compositions of canonical jazz musicians in order to associate themselves with the longer history of jazz, and to state their allegiance to their musical predecessors.¹⁷

¹⁶ Howard Becker discusses the “use” an art world has for set of aesthetics, and his comments are relevant here: “It ties participants’ activities to the tradition of the art, justifying their demands for the resources and advantages ordinarily available to people who produce that kind of art” (Becker 1982:132).

¹⁷ Gabriel Solis discusses how avant-gardists such as the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Steve Lacy, and Roswell Rudd all play Thelonious Monk compositions as a means of interacting with jazz tradition (Solis 2008). Similarly, Ronald Radano has argued that, while largely known as an experimentalist or avant-gardism, Anthony Braxton, “in a multitude of ways, has drawn from the African-American legacy” (Radano 1993, 5)

Unannounced Standards

When a jazz musician plays a standard—that is, a tune that jazz musicians are expected to know by heart and that is well-known by jazz aficionados—she adds a layer of performance on top of the music she already is playing. Any performance of a jazz standard represents an engagement with musical history and collective musical memory, invoking previous performances and recordings of the standard (Berliner 1994:63, ff.; Monson 1996:98). It's one of those songs that jazz musicians play regularly, perennially. Musicians live with standards in long-term relationships; they may not play one for years, but return to it after a period of time apart.

What happens when a knowledgeable jazz listener unexpectedly encounters a “standard” during a live performance? Depending upon the knowledge of the listener, the moment of recognition might involve a few other performances or dozens of remembered versions. In some situations the musician presents an unannounced standard as an offering to the audience; this offering rests on the audience's ability to either recognize the tune or to recognize that the performer is presenting a standard. At times this recognition takes place beneath or behind layers of reharmonization, metrical rearrangement, melodic subterfuge. A listener's aural excavation of musical sound might yield a familiar tune, a reward for her work. Even if the listener does not recognize the tune, she may glean the fact that a famous composition is being interpolated by

and must be understood as constantly interacting with various strands of African American cultural production.

registering a shift in the performer's attitude that signals a framing of the music coming next, noting a sudden burst of applause, or observing the body language of other listeners.

Regardless of Shipp's intentions in playing standards during his continuous solo improvisation, the presence of these well-known tunes stuck out as aural sign-posts for members of the audience, myself included. The glances, nods and other body-language communications I shared with Nicole, Steve, and Yuko made our experience of Shipp's music dialogic and, to an extent, collective. "Fly Me to the Moon," "Autumn Leaves," and "C-Jam Blues" surfaced and receded within the continuous flow of music; we could aurally ride the waves of tension and release created by Shipp's inclusion of these tunes. Our hearing of Shipp's music registered visually through bodily gesture: nods, facial expressions, words written and lines drawn on paper. We interacted with Shipp's performance and also interacted with one another's hearing.

3.4 Performing Listening and the Figuration of Jazz Musicians

In this next example, listening is performed not just by audience members, but by the performers "on stage." I consider a set at the Local 269 in which the interaction between the performers evidences the culturally-situated listening practices of the scene at two levels: a synchronic, moment-by-moment listening to the sounds happening

during the performance, and a diachronic listening to earlier jazz musicality and periods of blended U.S. and jazz history.¹⁸

11 August 2009, The Local 269

It is a warm, humid night. Today the heat has been manageable; the high temperature was in the upper 80s. The humidity is another matter. It's one of those summer evenings where the humidity was won out over the heat, and you peel your skin off the table as you lift your arm. I alternately stand and sit at the back end of the Local 269. The bar usually employs some manner of air-conditioning, but tonight it's not up to the task.

At about 8:15pm they begin. Steve Dalachinsky is performing with Alby Balgochian's Basscentric, a double-bass trio made up of Balgochian, Michael Bisio, and Lisle Ellis, all stalwart participants in the LES scene. Steve has asked me to record the performance tonight, and so I have positioned my digital recorder on a table a few feet from where he stands. The audience is light. They are mostly RUCMA regulars, as indicated by the scraggly but enthusiastic applause for emcee Fay Victor and the performers. An unremarkable Tuesday night at the Local 269.

Balgochian begins the performance with a bowed trill. As he continues the trill, he moves his bow closer to the bridge of his bass. He slips into the *sul ponticello* area of the string, working the second, third, and fourth harmonics above the two fundamental

¹⁸ I am in part extending Berliner's (1994) analysis of how jazz musicians continually listen on these two levels – the synchronic and the diachronic – by applying his discussion to a specific instance of performance.

pitches of the trill. The trill becomes phantasmagoric, slithery. Bisio enters with slow-moving lines that create dissonances with Balgochian's trill. A feeling of suspense, both musical and processual, as we wait for Steve's entrance.

"You can color all the poems you like," Steve begins, in a tense, urgent tone. Immediately, Ellis bows a deep, low note, creating a drone at odds with the pitch content of both Balgochian's and Bisio's lines. Within a minute, Steve has mentioned "war," "revolution," and "slavery," consolidating the grave affect suggested by the basses' music.

The bassists improvise music while Steve reads his poetry. He reads from a thick, heavy book and from loose pieces of letter-size paper. The book is his collaboration with Jacques Bisceglia, a photographer who documented jazz musicians for over 40 years, and a close friend of Steve's. In some 450 pages, Bisceglia's black and white photography alternates with Dalachinsky's jazz-inspired poems. The loose pieces of paper are more recent poems Steve has written; most are printed, though some sheets have handwritten words on them. Next to him lies a small table, upon which he puts the book when not using it. He speaks into a stand-mounted microphone, the poetry in his right hand, a small flashlight in his left, so that he can see his words in the dim lighting of the 269. Before long, the faces of the bassists shine with sweat. Steve intermittently pushes his glasses up to the bridge of his nose with his left index finger, but the humidity makes it a losing battle.

Three and a half minutes into the performance, there are technical difficulties. An audience member asks the bartender - who also controls the P.A. system - "Can he be louder?" Steve pauses in his recitation while cable connections are checked and the

situation of the faulty mic is addressed. Meanwhile the bassists keep playing, continue the sonic flow of the performance.

“The microphone is *not* really working,” Steve continues in the vocal tone and cadence with which he had been reciting his poetry. Deadpan, cheeky.

“*Now* it is!” comes a heterophonic reply of several voices from the audience. There are a few laughs at Steve’s joke.

“Now it is,” he continues in his “poetry-reading” voice. The laughter grows as recognition of his joke grows. “And don’t we wish we didn’t have to *use* a mic to begin with.” Scattered claps. The audience is right with Steve as he begins to improvise a humorous departure from the text of his poem. Next to me at the rear of the bar, Brad Farberman comments in a smiling, singsongy voice, “Doctor Dalachinsky!” We are enjoying ourselves.

Steve continues:

“Ah...but to live only once in this world and live again.” The audience responds with laughter in the pause he leaves.

“Tis better to improvise than to read since I cannot see it anyway.” Uproarious laughter ensues.

Steve has recontextualized the sonic-oral style he uses to do jazz poetry performances. He delivers his words in a voice that lingers within a narrow pitch range, but with the sound of slightly tensed vocal cords. This method of intonation results in the impression that Steve is portraying an affect of urgency, though he does not hurry through his lines. His phrases are usually highlighted by prosodic stress, moments when

he vocally “leans into” certain words. This performative style and the typical subject matter of Steve’s poems usually combine to communicate a sense of unease and indignation.¹⁹ Now, as he ad-libs about a malfunctioning microphone and his inability to see in the dim light of the bar, Steve’s performative style becomes literally ludicrous. The speaking style he usually employs to communicate a “serious” affect he now superimposes upon playful content, creating incongruity, ironic, and therefore humor.

Steve acknowledges the rupture in performative continuity created by the microphone problem. He’s playing with his own sonic-oral mannerisms, mimicking himself. He’s also improvising about improvisation, the improvisation inherent in the present performance (both his own improvisations on his poetry and his bandmates’ musical improvisation). During his digression, the bassists have veered from their musical interplay. They assumed the role of being Steve’s “straight man,” maintaining the “serious” musical affect while his words veered towards greater incongruity with both their music and his vocal style.

During this comical aside, Steve has pointed to the social frame of “performance” in which all of us present are engaging. In its playfulness, his meta-performative digression invites the audience to participate in his reflexive, winking dramatization of performance. The implicit becomes explicit; while the applause after solos typically breaks the fourth wall in jazz performances, Steve’s gambit of “going meta” further pulls the

¹⁹ Dalachinsky’s oeuvre of poetry is voluminous, but from my experience of reading through and listening to his poems I can list a few recurring or favorite topics, themes and keywords. These include: references to current political turmoil, musings about ongoing social questions of race and capitalism, incorporations of quotidian events, insertions of snippets of conversation overheard on the street. As Steve so often has written poetry *during* and *in response* to jazz performance, references to jazz musicians and meditations on the practice of jazz improvisation are a hallmark of his style.

artifices of the musical performance out into the open. Steve remains silent for about 20 seconds, letting the humor dissipate while Basscentric continues playing, steering the performance back to its previous course.

As the set proceeds, Steve reads snippets of poems, choosing his excerpts and their ordering on the fly. He often strays from the original forms of his texts, repeating a word that he wishes to emphasize, creating rhythmic propulsion and tension through the repetition. In his way, he is improvising along with the bassists, working the words - the sound-images they evoke and invoke - like melodic cells, doing his version of motivic development. He draws freely from his poems, sometimes reading a poem in its entirety (albeit with repetitions inserted), other times beginning in the middle of a poem, reading a few lines. Besides writing, Steve works in the visual collage form. He has done many chapbooks of collages with his wife Yuko. Tonight, as with other readings he gives, he creates an oral collage from his poems.

Several minutes later, Balgochian decides to use the body of his bass as a drum. Patting the face with one hand and the side of the body with the other, Alby produces two clear pitches. He plays a rhythmic pattern that suggests Afro-Cuban drumming; it's a convincing impersonation of a conga. Steve has been "laying out" for about a minute. He enters with a poem titled "The Lake," written during a performance that saxophonist Oliver Lake gave at Roulette in 2005. Figure 7 shows the full text of the poem as it appears in *Reaching into the Unknown*.

there is this lake
it spits images up at the spectator
it is anonymous
tho
known
placid when un
touched
viewed
it is always un
touched
it spits images into the faces of its
spectators it remains untouched
it is there even when the spectators are not
spits placid images
even when they are far away
splits spilt calpids
spits placid images
twisted & yawning up onto the
river bank
empties itself of spectators
spits images at those viewing its never
changing surface

placid lake aloof
is breathtaking is spectator
& spectacular
spits itself onto the shore
becomes spectator
watching itself from the shore
watching itself from the lake
becomes spectator / & / spectacle
becomes motion/less ripple less
shore less lake-less root...less
outlet / for / spectator
not seeing the isn't is inevitable
not being the isn't is unthinkable.

Figure 7. "The Lake" by Steven Dalachinsky (Bisceglia and Dalachinsky 2009).

I wish to leave aside hermeneutic questions of meaning and focus instead on the phonetic attributes of this poem. It is the phonetic, or sonic, content of the words that concerns me because on this evening Steve's delivery of the poem was very much about working in the sound, the sensuous aural quality, of words.²⁰ The text of the poem exploits the homonymic quality of the word "lake," playing with the ambiguity of whether "lake" refers to the saxophonist's surname or to the geographical body of water. Steve's poem constructs the metaphor that the saxophonist Oliver Lake *is* the body of water indicated in the text; the underlying idea being that Lake's stoic manner when performing resembles the stillness of a lake. The text also engages in orthographic and semantic play. It contains the following anagrammatic transformations: "spit" leads to "split" and then to "spilt;" "placid" leads to "calpid." Steve's poem creates a slippage between phonological and phonetic difference: sometimes slight differences in sound yield an existing word; sometimes anagrammatic transformation yield nonsense words ("calpid").

During tonight's performance, Dalachinsky works the consonant combinations "sp" and "pl," eventually treating them as sonic/musical motifs of their own. Figure 8 shows a transcription of Dalachinsky's vocal performance of "The Lake" on this evening.²¹

²⁰ My analysis of the musical qualities of Dalachinsky's reading is informed by scholarship that explicates the expressive and emotive qualities of phonetics and distortions of normative phonology (Bickford 2007; Emoff 1998; Fox 2004).

²¹ I employ the following orthographic notations in my transcription: *italics* indicate prosodic stress; CAPS indicate extreme prosodic stress; line breaks indicate a pause in delivery greater than 2 seconds; periods [.] separated by a single space indicate relative durations of pausing, i.e., [. . .] indicates a longer pause than [.]; repeated letters [sss] indicate durational stress on a consonant or vowel sound; a dash [-] after a letter indicates an interrupted or abruptly cut-off word.

there is this lake

there is this . lake and it . spits images up at the spectator

it is anonymous tho tho . placid lake . . when untouched . viewed . it's always untouched it . spits images
into the faces of its . sspectators this . lake remains un-touched . it is . there even when the
spectators are not . . it spits placid . images even when they are . far away this . lake it . spits and .
sspilt like . calpids . ssplits it . spilt it . placid like . image twisted and . . yawning up into the river
bank it . empties itself at the . spectators this . lake this . lake spits images at . those viewing it's never
. changing surfa- placid . pla PLA placid

placid aloof it's . . breathtaking to the . sspectator it'ss . sss . Pectacular it . . sss . Pectacle and it . sssPins
itself . . onto the shore . this . lake becomes . sspectator watching itself from the . . shore this . lake .
this . hheavy . hheavy lake . watching itself . from . the lake . it . sself watching it . sself the lake . it's .
watching itself

become a spectator and a sss . Pectacle . this . . lake becomes . . motionless . ripples this . lake this .
shoreless lakeless . . motionless . not this . with this . witness of lake . OUT . let . listless lake for .
ssspectator it's . not for sseeing it isn't . inevitable it's . not because it isn't even . . unthunkable . this
this this . lake

[shifts to lower register, voice more relaxed] this . heavy . heavy . book

Figure 8. Transcription of Dalachinsky's performance of "The Lake," 11 August 2009.

After the mini-climax reached on Steve's stuttering repetitions of "this," Basscentric rapidly decrescendos and thins out the texture of the musical accompaniment they have been providing. This drop in volume and textural density permits Steve to relax his voice, bringing it lower in register than at any time during his recitation of this poem, and improvise a cheeky denouement.

Steve's performance of this poem is also an act of listening and a *rehearing*. Leading into the sibilant "s" and exaggerating the ejective characteristic of "p," Steve engages in a good bit of vocalic percussion during this reading, possibly responding to Alby Balgochian's improvised Afro-Cuban rhythms on "conga-bass." I would argue that Steve is also "rehearing" Oliver Lake - not necessarily the Roulette concert at which he wrote the poem, but an aggregate of all the times he's listened to Lake, or perhaps an aggregate of various saxophonists). Steve begins his phonetic play on the first occurrence of the word "spits." The poem's central image - that of a lake spitting images at its spectators - functions as a metaphor for Oliver Lake's relationship to his audience. Spitting, then, is a figurative description of Lake playing his saxophone, (almost) spitting into his horn as he produces melodic lines. Spitting indexes a saxophonist articulating, or tonguing, his notes. Steve exploits the iconicity - the intrinsic *onomatopoeia* - of the word "spit" when he leans into the "sp" consonant cluster. By doing this he also vocally acts out the word/sound/image of a saxophonist articulating. The consonant cluster "pl" similarly imitates and/or indexes both the attack of a percussion instrument being struck, and the attack of a saxophonist's tongue against her reed.²²

As he speaks words he wrote while attending a jazz performance several years before, Steve improvises with the sounds of his words. Using his mouth and speaking

²² While Oliver Lake provided the original impetus for Steve's poem, my interpretation of Steve's performance of his poem does not necessarily hinge upon the particularities of Lake's playing, beyond, perhaps, Lake's propensity for crisp note articulations. I often heard LES musicians and listener compare Lake to multi-reedist Eric Dolphy; both favor piercing saxophone tones and jagged melodies employing wide intervallic leaps. Steve's emphasis on the consonant clusters "sp," and "pl" would be incongruous in a poem about Stan Getz, for instance, who typically employed a softer, less punctuated tonguing/articulation technique.

voice as an instrument, he plays with sound while Basscentric also plays with sound. While “playing himself” (as any singer or vocalist does), Steve mimics the aural and kinesthetic qualities of note attacks on membranophones (tonight doubling as a bass) and aerophones. His mimetic act arises from auditory acts; as he hears Balgochian drum and (re)hears Lake blow, he riffs with them, pushing his utterances toward the sonic and away from the lexical.

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Dalachinsky’s strategy of writing poems that are about or dedicated to specific jazz musicians is indicative of how specific musicians live within the imaginations of listeners. When LES avant-jazz scene members think about jazz music, it is often in terms of *specific* musicians. For instance, I heard listeners on the scene describe John Blum, a pianist who plays in a percussive manner that often employs pantonality and thick harmonic clusters, as being stylistically indebted to Cecil Taylor. Tracing this lineage is not only about hearing pathways of musical influence; it also evidences a *way* of hearing, an *acoustemology*, oriented to musical personae. I call this acoustemological practice *figuration*. *Figuration* acknowledges the ways in which various notions of jazz musicians circulate around jazz scenes. Listeners represent or *figure* renowned musicians such as Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, et al. in various ways. In turn, these musicians come to resemble *figures* in jazz discourse. A figure is a visual representation of a human form, a typical representation of a phenomenon, a metaphorical operation in

rhetoric.²³ In the terminology of Western art music, a figure is “short succession of notes, either as melody or a group of chords, which produces a single, complete, and distinct impression” (*OED*). While Steve’s Oliver Lake poem illustrates this way of knowing jazz sounds, a more vivid example of the practice of the *figuration* of jazz musicians occurs a bit later in this set, when Dalachinsky and Basscentric invoke the figure of John Coltrane.²⁴

§

Steve finishes one of his poems; hearing and sensing a conclusion, Basscentric decrescendos. The musical texture thins out to the *sul ponticello* trill that began the set, the trill again serving as the sound of anticipation, suspension. Michael Bisio begins to play a bowed, diatonic melody that contrasts starkly with what came a few moments before. Balgochian and Ellis quietly bow a drone to accompany Bisio. Assisted by the stillness of the drone, the room feels pensive. Sparks of aural recognition pop in my mind—this is a Coltrane tune...Bisio’s playing “Alabama”! He has inserted a standard, unannounced, into this otherwise “free” set. I look around at the other audience members; many seem to be leaning in towards the band stage, as though Bisio has called them to attention.

²³ I am drawing from the various definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry (Figure, N. n.d.).

²⁴ Meintjes uses *figure* as a theoretical frame in a similar manner. She writes: “Figuring is a way of connecting form out into the world, a way of interpreting the experience of musical sound into language, a way of mediating aesthetic and social experience” (Meintjes 2003:172).

“Alabama” is a minor-mode, hymn-like tune that Coltrane composed in response to the Ku Klux Klan’s bombing of an African-American church in Birmingham, AL.²⁵ Though Coltrane recorded the composition only once in the studio and once for a television special, as opposed to the dozens of performances the Coltrane Quartet gave of “Afro Blue,” “Impressions,” or other tunes, “Alabama” looms large within the canon of Coltrane’s recorded works and holds a privileged status among jazz listeners. “Alabama,” like many of Coltrane’s melodies, lives in the sonic imaginations of jazz listeners. The sound of Coltrane’s saxophone, his *voice* through the instrument, holds powerful affective meaning and associations for jazz aficionados and musicians. It’s as though Coltrane and his music are “always there” in the jazz imaginary, a constantly available resource, an omnipresent realm of sound with its own structure of feeling. The very specific referents of Coltrane’s “Alabama” – the horrific and racially-driven murder of African Americans – ensure that the tune evokes grief for those who know the reference and consider it a tragedy.

For the first edition of the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, an anthology intended to present a definitive overview of jazz through landmark recordings, jazz critic Martin Williams selected “Alabama” as the single track to represent Coltrane’s work as a bandleader.²⁶ “Alabama” was also used at key dramaturgical moments in the soundtrack for Spike Lee’s documentary about the church bombing, *4 Little Girls* (Lee 1998).

²⁵ The bombing killed four black girls and remains an iconic example of the violent resistance the Civil Rights Movement encountered.

²⁶ The revised edition has replaced “Alabama” with three tracks representing the various styles and idioms Coltrane worked within and pioneered. Compare Williams (1987) with *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology* (2010).

“Alabama” plays in the background at about the midpoint of the film, when relatives and friends of the murdered girls, with tearful eyes and trembling voices, recollect specific details about the day of the bombing. It plays again near the end of the film, a thematic reprise that consolidates the tragic affect of the film.²⁷

Bisio taps into the sound world of Coltrane when he starts playing “Alabama” and Steve hears it. After Bisio has played a few phrases of the melody, Steve begins to read from his poem titled “John Coltrane.” The “speaker” of the poem addresses John Coltrane. Written in 1999, the poem quotes the titles of many Coltrane compositions and albums and weaves them into an utterance that is part meditation on the past four decades of U.S. history, part intimate personal confidence, and part philosophical inquiry. Figure 9 shows Dalachinsky’s excerpts from the poem, as he reads them this night. Figure 9a lists the song and/or album titles that appear in Figure 9.

²⁷ “Alabama” plays in the film’s soundtrack at 55:00 and 1:33:35.

John Coltrane? [rise in pitch at end of surname] . Where is the Promise?
 Is it on Mars? . . Jupiter?
 Alabama? . . [hushed voice] Is it in Alabama, John Coltrane?
 assassination . integration
 Kennedy . King . X . . Kennedy . King . X
 Where are those . Three . Little Words, John Coltrane?
 Apple . Serenity . Joy
 Are all the choices we make the wrong kind?
 John Coltrane
 my voice was mumbling beauty long before . . long before
 John Coltrane . Where . Where is the Promise?

Figure 9. Transcription of Dalachinsky’s performance of “John Coltrane,” 11 August 2009.

“The Promise” (composed by Coltrane, first recorded in 1963)

“Mars” (composed by Coltrane, recorded in 1967. This remained untitled and unreleased through Coltrane lifetime. It was named by Coltrane’s widow and released on the 1974 album *Interstellar Space*)

“Jupiter” (same as “Mars”)

“Alabama” (composed by Coltrane, first recorded in 1963)

“Three Little Words” (composed by Ruby & Kalmar, recorded by Coltrane in 1960)

“Serenity” (part of the *Meditations* suite, composed by Coltrane, first recorded in 1965)

“Joy” (same as “Serenity”)

Figure 9a. Titles of compositions Coltrane recorded that appear in Dalachinsky’s “John Coltrane.”

Steve draws freely from several points in the poem. Though the line “Where is the Promise” appears only once in the text, here Steve uses it as a thematic statement, his return to it creating a small closed form. In response to the all-bass performance of

“Alabama” that is taking place, Steve repeats the word, and then jumps earlier in the text of his poem to recite words that elaborate on the thematic associations the song holds: “assassination,” “integration,” [John and/or Robert] “Kennedy,” [Martin Luther] “King,” and [Malcolm] “X.” Steve replaces the word “Offerings” in the text with “choices.” While “Offering” is the title of another Coltrane composition (and hence capitalized in the printed text), Steve’s substitution here is polysemic. Choices conjures the idea of human agency. Making a “wrong” offering may result in the dissatisfaction of a deity or other powerful being. “All the choices” being wrong implies something more prolonged, with lasting consequences.

Like the sounds of the soul music of Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and others, Coltrane’s saxophone was heard as giving voice to the complex web of sentiments that circulated around African American communities during the 60s. Awareness of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing can inflect one’s hearing of “Alabama,” amplifying the pathos that Coltrane intended to convey. But “Alabama” is one example of a composition-*type* to which Coltrane returned repeatedly during the 1960s. Its hallmarks are: a minor-mode harmonic center; slow or suspended tempos with heavy *rubato* (often including a bass drone or pedal tone); a melody that mimics the rhythms and pitch contours of the human voice, particularly the preaching style in certain African American churches.²⁸

²⁸ Steve Rowland’s documentary *Tell Me How Long Trane’s Been Gone* goes so far as to hypothesize that Coltrane based the melody of “Alabama” on the oratory of Martin Luther King, in particular his public response to the Birmingham bombing. In actuality, the documentary uses artful editing to make phrases from King’s speech overlap and rhythmically align with the cadence of Coltrane’s melody. The veracity of whether or not Coltrane based “Alabama” on MLK’s speaking style is not as important as the *intent* behind

Just as many listeners have attached universalist meanings to Coltrane's music. During his lifetime and especially after his death, he was lionized as a musician who was singularly devoted to pushing his music into new directions. Besides numerous biographies that lean heavily toward the hagiographic, the St. John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco provides visible and tangible evidence of Coltrane's literal canonization in some circles. He was canonized and mythologized as a musician who was singularly and tirelessly devoted to pushing his music into new directions.²⁹ To these admirers and commentators, Coltrane represents a "pure" soul of mythic stature, a man so sincere in his pursuit of musical excellence and spiritual enlightenment that he somehow transcends the contingencies and material history of human existence. Perhaps inadvertently, Coltrane himself helped build this representation through interviews, liner notes he wrote, and titles he gave to musical works. Beginning in about 1961, abstract, spacious titles with spiritual and philosophical connotations - titles such as *Ascension*, "The Promise," *Meditations* - became increasingly prominent in Coltrane's recorded work.

that claim - the motivations of linking Coltrane's music with the political affects of the Civil Rights movement, and also, crucially, of figuring Coltrane's saxophone as symbolically speaking. The radio documentary is not the first biographical work on Coltrane to make this claim; various biographers posit the link between King's eulogy and "Alabama," usually without specific evidence. The earliest instance of the hypothesis that I have found is in Bill Cole's (1976) biography. Porter has found no conclusive evidence that Coltrane based "Alabama" on a King speech. (1997:331) The apocryphal story of "Alabama" partakes in a broader trope that circulates among jazz communities, a trope that equates Coltrane's saxophonic sound with the qualities of the human voice. This trope represents a particularized version of the more general discourse of jazz music as "saying something," which Ingrid Monson explicates in her book bearing that title (1996).

²⁹ See the biographies by Cole (1976), Nisenson (1993), Simpkins (1975) and Thomas (1976), as well as the piece by Benston (1979), for examples of hagiography that ascribe to Coltrane a messianic or superhuman status. Benston and Cole also exemplify the way Coltrane came to occupy an iconic status for scholars and artists wishing to advance an African-American cultural aesthetic in the 1970s.

In his study of music and talk in rural Texas, Aaron Fox (2004) provides a close sonic and social analysis of a particular moment of music-making, also occurring in a divey bar and also involving a respected musician. Fox's account centers on the presence and importance of the figure of singer Johnny Cash in the lives of the working-class Texans with whom Fox played music and socialized. He interprets what the sounds of Cash's voice and Luther Perkins' guitar mean for those people in that small Texas town. The lyrics, melody, and instrumental accompaniment of "Folsom Prison Blues" communicate feelings of longing and marginalization, feelings made particular because they are inflected by class and region. The melancholy the song's narrator feels is a *working-class* melancholy, and it is specifically the (white) working-class of the American South and/or West. Big Joe, a singer praised for his ability to convey deep feeling when performing a song, channels Johnny Cash in an unexpectedly powerful way during an impromptu performance of Cash's hit "Folsom Prison Blues." One of the points here is the power of symbols: "Folsom Prison Blues" metonymically represents the overall gestalt of Cash's life in music; Cash in turn functions as a metonym, or embodiment, of the affective life of working-class America. Cash and his music can be called upon as a focusing device to harness the web of tropes that animate the mythology of country music. Playing a Johnny Cash tune creates a sense of solidarity, because all the people in the bar implicitly agree about Cash's canonic status and his presence in their sonic-poetic imaginations.

John Coltrane possesses an analogous status for jazz musicians and listeners in various scenes. The voice of the poem, its tone of confiding in and seeking wisdom from

John Coltrane, gives a sense of a figuration of Coltrane that is typical among members of the LES avant-jazz scene (as well as many jazz listeners beyond the scene). For those who admired his music, Coltrane personified an intense and fundamental sincerity. When performed at the right moment and handled in the right way, a Coltrane composition can infuse a jazz performance with a particular kind of gravitas. Playing a Coltrane tune is a tribute, not only to the man himself, but to the multiple values he represents within jazz imaginaries and African American imaginaries. Since the late 60s, Coltrane has achieved polysemic status; his music has meant something both specifically African American and generally human.

For jazz musicians and listeners within the LES avant-jazz scene, Coltrane's iconic status is assumed, but individuals still communicate their shared affection for his music. On Facebook, certain members of the scene regularly post Youtube videos and photos of Coltrane. Such posts are met with numerous "likes," and comments such as, "John left us too soon." Reaffirming one's admiration for, even one's faith in, Coltrane's music also reaffirms one's commitment to the tradition of avant-garde jazz.

During this summer evening in the Local 269, John Coltrane - his music, his sound, his image, the memory of him made public among jazz listeners - enters the performance. Tonight the performers' *figuration* of Coltrane acts as a sonic signpost, or landmark. Bisio's personal affection for "Alabama" (Steve later mentioned to me that the composition is a favorite of Bisio's) influenced his semi-spontaneous decision to play it during this set. The canonical status of "Alabama" ensures that other listeners - especially Balgochian, Dalachinsky, and Ellis - are likely to recognize it as a John Coltrane tune

before long. It provides a common ground that Basscentric and Dalachinsky can tread. The bassists sit in the minor-mode, dirge-like atmosphere of the song, even playing *pizzicato* lines that recall the timbrally dark, low-register improvisations of Coltrane's bassist Jimmy Garrison. Steve quickly makes a decision about what to read once Bisio begins "Alabama" - one of his poems about John Coltrane, of course. Though nobody *becomes* John Coltrane during this set (in the way that Fox argues Big Joe momentarily *was* Johnny Cash), Coltrane briefly enters the Local 269 in the form of a sonic gestalt - a whole of which "Alabama" forms a constituent part.

3.5 Figuring Listening During Moments of Performances

In and around live performances of avant-jazz, listening becomes perceptible. The supposedly internal act of listening closely registers on listeners' bodies in my examples: Bruce Gallanter's closed eyes and bowed head, James Keepnews' extroverted bodily gestures of approval, Nicole's silent pronunciation of the lyrics to "Autumn Leaves." Jeff Schlanger's creation of artistic expressions of his aural experience elaborates the process of embodied listening. During avant-jazz performances, Schlanger uses his body to externalize his listening. The verbal discourse he has cultivated to help shape interpretation of his artwork acts in an auxiliary function, metaphorically amplifying the physicality of his listening and its tangible residue in his art.

The collectively-reproduced customs of *how* to listen during avant-jazz performances reinforce the necessary social frames in which musicians play; improvisations that explore timbral nuances at low dynamic levels would become an

exercise in futility in the context of a loud audience.³⁰ However, in the presence of a quiet audience, as in Joe McPhee's performance, this kind of improvising becomes coherent. Quiet noises issuing from the musicians can resonate *as music* within the performance space; the audience partakes in the musical rhetoric offered up by the musician(s). Audible applause is a permissible breach of the expectation of quiet, concentrated listening because it encourages the musicians and fortifies the shared sense of presence, upon which avant-jazz performances depend.³¹

In order to help them share listening, to make the interiority of musical perception into something social, LES scene members use the tried and true device of calling upon "jazz tradition" and/or "jazz history." Steve Cannon calls upon tradition/history when he mentions Clifford Brown and presents an excerpt from *Stormy Weather*; in these performative gestures he also indexes the time he has put in to hearing, watching, and understanding objects of jazz and African American cultures. Steve Dalachinsky reads his poem about an experience of listening to saxophonist Oliver Lake. In performing his poem, Steve symbolically *listens back* to Lake and other saxophonists, and performs with musicality his hearing of the sounds of jazz saxophone. Steve Dalachinsky and Michael Bisio call upon an especially potent figure in jazz history—John

³⁰ The ethnographic descriptions that open Chapter 2 discuss just such moments of disjuncture between the register of musical performance and the decorum of the audience in the Local 269.

³¹ Scott Currie (2009) provides a thorough explication of the cultural logic of avant-jazz performance. Employing Victor Turner's theorizations of "liminality" and "communitas," Currie focuses on meaning production and argues that a primary goal of avant-jazz performances is the creation of "a profoundly utopian socio-sonic world" (7). I take Currie's phrase to refer to avant-jazz participants' aspirations to cultivate an egalitarian social formation in which musical sound and performance continually reproduce feelings of "we-ness" and belonging, i.e., a similarly romantic notion of music's universal and transcendental powers to what Alfred Schütz describes.

Coltrane—to pay tribute to a departed master, and in so doing, reinforce a sense of belonging in and to the current-day LES avant-jazz scene. Matthew Shipp crafts a musical performance that freely mixes atonal improvisation with jazz standards, implying that both exist within a continuum of jazz musical practices; with this stylistic juxtaposition, Shipp performs an idiosyncratic demonstration of Amiri Baraka’s notion of “the changing same,” linking a Cecil Taylor-esque style employing dissonances, metric ambiguity, and textural density back to the “mainstream” tradition of playing standards.³²

Calling upon a notion of jazz “tradition” or “history” also entails a *figuration* of those two concepts. “Jazz history” and “jazz tradition” are concepts and narratives that participants in the LES avant-jazz scene continually shape and work upon. Steve Cannon’s mention of Clifford Brown, Schlanger’s talk of Muhal Richard Abrams, Julius Hemphill and Joe McPhee, Bisio and Dalachinsky’s invocation of John Coltrane, and Matt Shipp’s performing standards—all these acts *refigure* narratives of jazz history and tradition (sometimes ever so slightly) and *refigure* musicians who populate that history. Listening often serves as the medium for this cultural work of *figuration* and canonization. Listening occurs in any musical performance and provides the foundation for almost any social talk occurring in the LES scene *about* music. Despite its ubiquity, listening is empirically obscure. Its obscurity challenges ethnographic description and

³² In an essay often cited in studies of African American music, Baraka propounds a notion of a common essence shared by all African American music, terming it “the changing same” (see Baraka 1967). I refer to this trope in part because one of Baraka’s agendas in the essay was explicating a stylistic and spiritual link between the 1960s jazz avant-garde (what he called “New Black Music”) and earlier, less experimental forms of African American music.

Attending to how jazz performances involve “listening back” to jazz history also reminds us that two landmark ethnographies of jazz performance are also, crucially, studies of listening cultures (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996).

interpretation according to positivistic approaches. Yet, as I hope to have shown in this chapter, empirical evidence of listening can be found around live performances of avant-jazz. One must look and listen for the traces of listening, the implied contours of auditory acts—which often manifest themselves in various forms of performance.

Chapter 4

I Know About the Life: The Habitus of Listening in the LES Scene¹

4.1 Introduction

...Brad Farberman and I stand at our usual spot toward the back of the Local 269. We have begun to chat intermittently – the music being loud enough for us to do so unobtrusively – picking up on a conversation we’d been having about obscure 1960s soul records. As we talk, each of us still keeps an ear on the live music in our midst. Brad points out the tenor sax player who has joined the band for a couple of tunes. “This guy is getting a lot of buzz. His name is Noah Preminger. There was an article in the [New York] Times about him.” A few minutes later, as we continue our palaver, Brad stops in mid-sentence to listen to a bit of Preminger’s playing. “This cat sounds good, right?” He has rapidly shifted his attention and I follow suit. We listen for a few phrases, digging Preminger’s playing. Then we resume chatting...

...Roberta and Richard Berger volunteer for the Neues Kabarett series at the Brecht Forum and for AFA music events. They live in Staten Island; Richard works for the United States Postal Service in Manhattan. They go to hear music in lower Manhattan in the evenings, after Richard’s workday. The trip home to Staten Island can take two hours. Roberta is gregarious with the musicians, giving them friendly kisses on the cheek when saying hello, putting an arm around their shoulders. Richard is more reserved, but

¹ See Shepp (2003).

he too greets many of the musicians who play at the 269, the Brecht, and the Vision Festival in a casual, if quiet, manner. While we stand outside the Local 269 during one of our first conversations, Roberta tells me, “We got married older and never had any children, so we say the music is our child!” She punctuates this with a guffaw. Standing next to her and listening on, Richard grins in silence...

...Musicians come to each others’ gigs to provide moral support, to take in what colleagues and peers are up to, and to hang out. At the Local 269, the Brecht Forum, the Bowery Poetry Club, they stand around at the back of the room, sip some drink or other, lean in to mumble something into a friend’s ear. In between sets, some saunter outside the club, lean against the wall of the building or stand around in a circle, and continue to chew the fat. Some light cigarettes. Small, intermittent movements: feet swivel as someone shifts his weight, a head tilts back to exhale smoke out of the way of the others’ faces. They mill about in the back of the club, walk outside or into a hallway to get on their mobile phones, pace slowly as they talk, walk to the bathroom, then back to their spot at the back. I sometimes wonder if they listen to the music...

...“Steve the Mailman,” another USPS employee and yet another scene participant named “Steve,” is nodding off during a set at the Local 269. Dalachinsky tells me it’s because he’s already exhausted from his workday...

...During 2009 and 2010, Patrick Brennan held several “day jobs,” including ESL instructor gigs and other miscellaneous teaching jobs. I never was sure exactly how many jobs he held at a given time, but he often mentioned working nights. As a result, he would work on his music during the daytime. He liked to go to public parks to practice

saxophone. He told me, “as long as it’s above freezing, I can handle it. And it gives me space and the ability to play as loud as I want”...

...Several other musicians who perform often must keep “day jobs” to help them pay the bills: saxophonist Ras Moshe works as a substitute teacher in New York public school; trumpeter Lewis Barnes (a member of William Parker’s Quartet) drove a taxi for years; trumpeter/bass-clarinetist Matt Lavelle, a frequent associate of Ras Moshe and stalwart participant in the LES scene, works in the Sam Ash music store in midtown Manhattan...

§

There is a memory that Steve Dalachinsky uses from time to time. He carries it around with him, in his mind, for convenient retrieval. Now and then, its details shift slightly, but the important parts, the gist of it, remain the same. Dalachinsky shared the memory with me during our first extended conversation. In that telling, the details were as follows: sometime during his 16th year, Steve was walking on St Marks Place during one of the regular trips he made to the Lower East Side from his home in a residential neighborhood in Brooklyn. This would have been in about 1962. Steve was coming of age, and immersing himself in Beat literature and jazz. He knew that, in addition to Greenwich Village, the place to soak in the experimental writing, music, and art that was capturing his imagination was the Lower East Side, more specifically the area that was sometimes called “the East Village.” Walking down St Marks, heard strange sounds, apparently some kind of music unknown to him, emanating from a bar. He peered into the place from the sidewalk, as he was legally a minor and therefore too young to enter a

bar. He remembered seeing a pianist playing in a way he'd never seen before. The sign outside the bar advertised the featured musician: "Cecil Taylor." From there, Steve went on to an exploration of the outer edges of jazz (while never losing his love of hard-bop and other more "mainstream" jazz styles) that continues to the current day.

Several times over the course of my fieldwork, Dalachinsky told and referred to this memory with a reflexive edge. He sometimes called it "my Cecil story," nodding to the ways he had reified it by repeatedly telling it to others. With disarming frankness, he would also suggest that the entire memory was apocryphal: maybe it wasn't 1962, maybe he had been twelve (which would have made it 1958), or fifteen. Maybe it wasn't on St Marks, but somewhere else on the Lower East Side. Maybe it wasn't even *Cecil* he heard. Maybe he had just convinced himself that he had lived this memory by telling its story so many times.

Despite the ambiguous veracity of the details of the story, Steve unapologetically continues to mobilize it because its central purpose remains unaffected. The memory operates as a myth or fable about himself, relaying his discovery of the jazz avant-garde in a compressed, symbolic moment. The narrative figures this discovery as a formative experience, around which he constructed and continues to construct important features of his subjectivity. Steve has accepted the labels "jazz poet" or "street poet," he told me, because he realizes that so much of his writing treats jazz performance as a topic or has been aesthetically inspired by his listening experiences. In sharing this story, Steve locates himself *within* the overlapping histories of the Lower East Side and the jazz avant-garde, which I describe in Chapter 1. Moreover, I came to see Steve's "Cecil story," in all its

iterations, as among the most vivid arguments for why an account of those local histories would be a necessary part of an ethnography of listening practices and aural experiences among these participants in avant-jazz.

The themes and claims contained within Dalachinsky's memory of encountering Cecil Taylor's music demonstrate one of the ways that jazz listeners make legible or perceivable the immaterial "labor" of listening: by collecting aural experiences and strategically circulating those experiences in narrative form. Through decades of practice, jazz participants have structured, ritualized, and created a loose syntax for sharing their aural experience. This means that there are more and less effective ways of telling your listening stories, and better and worse moments in which to bring these stories out into the realm of the social. Once you have developed the passion for jazz, how do you then inhabit the social role of "serious listener"? Obviously, you will be listening to jazz often, but what will you have to show for it? How can you tell when you're in the presence of other serious listeners? How do you know a regular within the LES avant-jazz scene from a person who just happens to be in the audience that night?

In this chapter, I describe practices that are integral to the *habitus* of listening within the LES scene. My employment of the term "habitus" derives from Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of habitus as a deep-level structuring force in social life. As Bourdieu uses the word, *habitus* is not quite synonymic with "culture," as it is capable of shaping "culture;" on the other hand, since one's *habitus* both arises from and is manifested through practices, it is not the same as biological hardwiring or human "nature." For Bourdieu, an individual's *habitus* is shaped by structuring forces (such as

class, race, and gender), but individuals also have the ability, in turn, to modify their *habitus* through the practices they engage in during their lives.² In addition, I take up Judith Becker's application of the concept of *habitus* to ethnomusicological research in her theory of the "habitus of listening." I use the term "habitus of listening" as Becker does, to refer to "not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition *to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures*, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and one's emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways" (Becker 2004:73 *my italics*).³ I highlight Becker's "habitus of listening" as a means of foregrounding everyday practices, involving several senses and modes of action, that contribute to the formation of "listening" as an aural skill and social practice.

² Bourdieu defines "habitus" as follows: "The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions...that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu 1977:72). Sherry Ortner identifies Bourdieu's theory of habitus as a method for moving beyond the structure/agency binary that occupied anthropological thought for many years (Ortner 2006:1–19).

³ Here is the Becker quote in context: "Habitus is an embodied pattern of action and reaction, in which we are not fully conscious of why we do what we do; not totally determined, but a tendency to behave in a certain way. Our habitus of listening is tacit, unexamined, seemingly completely 'natural.' We listen in a particular way without thinking about it, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening. Most of our styles of listening have been learned through unconscious imitation of those who surround us and with whom we continually interact. A habitus of listening suggests not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and one's emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways. Scholars working within the disciplines of anthropology or ethnomusicology typically assume that the stance of the listener is not a given, not natural, but necessarily influenced by place, time, the shared context of culture, and the intricate and unreproduceable details of one's personal biography" (Becker 2004:73).

To be sure, Becker's work represents part of several lines of inquiry that form a broader discussion about the ways that history and culture (understood as intersubjective processes of interpretation and debate) mediate, and perhaps even make *possible*, the meanings humans derive from and attach to sensory experience. I engage with different portions of that discussion throughout the dissertation.

Such an exposition of LES-scene listeners' *habitus* runs the risk of appearing definitive or complete. In light of that risk, I emphasize the limits of my, or any, description of an ensemble of dispositions and practices that make up a *habitus*. Any single account of "reality" or "experience" is necessarily incomplete, and given from a particular vantage point of a positioned subject (see, e.g., Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Jackson 2007:i–xxvii). The attributes of the *habitus* of listening that I outline in this chapter grow out of social histories of practices of music-making, aural perception, interpretation. But there are just as many ways in which the listener *habitus* of the LES scene reveals the concerns of individuals who understand themselves to be entrenched in specific moments in the histories of jazz, New York, the United States, and even human beings. As I argue in Chapters 1 and 2, place and history fundamentally shape the processes of aural perception and interpretation at work in the LES scene. Put another way, the listener *habitus* I observed in the early 21st century is both specific to its time and place and reflective of longer traditions of jazz participation.

Collection-Narrating/Narrative-Collecting

Practices of collecting lie at the center of my conception of the *habitus* of listening in the LES avant-jazz scene. Part of my task in this chapter is to convey the richness of collecting and the multiple ways that scene participants collect aural experiences. In the context of the present study, I conceive of narrative creation and collecting as tightly enmeshed in symbiosis. If narrative represents one central practice, a metaphorical "yin" by which to "do" listening, collecting represents its dialectically-constructed "yang." A

particularly compelling narrative of aural experience might inspire a listener to add new recordings to his collection: *Man, you've gotta check out this live recording of Albert Ayler! The best version of "Ghosts" I ever heard!...* A memorable listening experience can become more pleasurable, more memorable, if narrated in an effective way to a sympathetic interlocutor; witness Dalachinsky's circulation of his "Cecil story." By "collecting," I refer not only to the more explicitly material practice of curating collections of sound recordings, but also to the intellectual and emotional practice of *curating collections of memories*, memories of listening experiences. Forming clusters of remembered moments and sounds into coherent and personally meaningful narratives, listeners on the scene circulate these narratives.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson writes: "Is it human to tell stories? For it would seem that storytelling is as ubiquitous and inevitable as the actions of breathing, eating, speaking, and mating...maybe we tell stories because we have no choice. Perhaps storytelling is part of the curse of consciousness" (Jackson 2009:97).⁴ As we go through our lives, we arrange disparate events into different configurations, order them in such a way as to make sense of the flux of existence, and then tell stories about that order to ourselves and to one another. Even when we are not conscious of it, we make our worlds through narrative and storytelling. Narrative construction is inherently social, that is, always directed towards a listener and hence always meant to exist between two or more

⁴ I have been stimulated by Michael Jackson's attention to the ubiquity of narrative as practice and as a basic mechanism of subjectivity and interpretation. Pertinent discussions can be found in (Jackson 1996:1-50; Jackson 2002a; Jackson 2007; Jackson 2009).

people. The words “social” and “society” trace their roots to the Latin *socius*, meaning “companion” or “friend” (OED Online 2013).

For my purposes here, “narrative” refers to a wider set of practices than “storytelling,” though the latter is a prevalent means of sharing narratives. I also conceive of processes of interpretation and evaluation that one does not verbalize as comprising “narrative practices.” Susan Stewart’s thinking on souvenirs and collections is apropos, with qualifications. Stewart argues that, in and of itself, a souvenir is incomplete; it is meaningless without an attached narrative, which is “not narrative of the object; *it is a narrative of the possessor*” (1993:136). Stewart describes collecting as a similar practice or technology of self, wherein the consumption of commodities becomes a perverse kind of production (1993: 151-166). While I find Stewart’s theorization of collecting as an affect-imbued practice of self to be illuminating, I have little use for the psychoanalytic dimensions of her argument since I am not concerned with whether or not collecting and tropes of collecting indicate the presence of psychological distress, or in Stewart’s words, “social disease” (ix).

It would follow that narrative provides a way for people to make sense of their aural experiences by creating a library or personal archive of listening experiences. Harris Berger (1999) traces the ways that culture frames and allows meaning to emerge from aural perception. Therefore, aural perceptions – even though they may confront the listener as being immediate – are always socially constructed and mediated through the interactions between individuals. The act of constructing narratives about and around one’s listening experiences is an inherently social act. Not only do listeners create a

personal archive of their aural experience so that they may access it, but, crucially, so that they may share its contents with other listeners.

Participants in the LES scene use narrative to construct listener subjectivities. Listening is not only achieved with one's ears. Along with the act of aural perception, I argue, scene participants *create* "listening" as a legible discourse (that of course refers to actual practices) by creating and circulating narratives about their listening experiences. The human capacity for narrative makes "listening" possible. The ability to construct stories about our listening experiences, to retain memories about our auditory experience and to arrange these memories into a story, enables us to imagine that there is such an act as "listening." We imagine "listening" and separate out the moments we spend concentrating on musical sound. As listeners shuttle between culling aural memories and reimagining listening (as a set of practices), the two processes dialogically inform one another.

Scholarship that treats collecting as a cultural practice usually includes theorization of the relations between the objects an individual collects and the emotions or affective values those objects hold for the individual. One strain of thought understands collecting as a process of reification, in which the collector removes the objects of the collection from their original contexts of production and use/consumption, and reconfigures them into an assemblage that reflects her desires and memories.⁵

⁵ Walter Benjamin prefigures some of Susan Stewart's (1993) arguments about collecting as a practice of self. He sees collecting as driven by the collector's desire to arrange her memories and writes "...for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (Benjamin 1968:67). Applying a similar interpretation of collecting in the context of artworks and cultural

Cultural studies and popular music studies have investigated power relations of gender in practices and tropes of record collecting. Several themes and claims recur in this literature: record collectors and connoisseurs tend to be men; the material collections and bodies of special knowledge (discographical, music-analytical, biographical) that practices of collecting yield function as symbolic forms of capital that index the collector's virility and help to define social relations between male collectors; conversely, music recordings can become the medium through which men express and share affects.⁶

Jazz studies and ethnographic work on hip-hop have enriched scholarly thinking on the roles that sound recordings play in musical-social life. Jazz scholarship has investigated the ways that recordings function as pedagogical tools for musicians (Berliner 1994; Faulkner and Becker 2009; Monson 1996; Solis 2008). Since the emergence of musical practices now categorized as "jazz," practitioners have honed their skills by listening to and playing along with recordings; jazz records serve as constant sources of inspiration and as historical texts against which musicians position their own work. In a similar vein, Joseph Schloss' ethnographic study of hip-hop DJs and producers explicates the ways in which these practitioners use sound recordings as the raw material

artifacts, James Clifford argues that collecting structures desire: "An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire" (Clifford 1988:218).

⁶ Will Straw (1997) and Keir Keightley (1996) offer pioneering analyses of how record collecting and the consumption of sound reproduction technology came to operate as ways of articulating masculinity. Both scholars also highlight the tropes of *addiction* and *obsession* that inflect popular-cultural representations that figure the practices of collecting and connoisseurship as masculine. John Dougan further refines this path of inquiry, while synthesizing it with some of James Clifford's thinking: "Expert status is generally conferred upon a record collector by other record collectors. The main criterion of an expert collector is that he (and they are overwhelmingly male) places a greater value on quality than quantity—thereby turning compulsive hoarding into meaningful desire" (Dougan 2006:45). Davis (2007) and Shuker (2010) provide further factual evidence and add ethnographic texture to the previous scholars' work, though they do not add any significant critical insights.

for creating musical works, including description and analysis of the ways hip-hop artists shop for, listen to, and interpret the sounds they hear on recordings (Schloss 2004).⁷

A Note on Gender

My own ethnographic observations corroborated many of the arguments I outline above. Within the context of early 21st century New York City, many LES-scene listeners reproduced the cultural trope of the male record collector/connoisseur that has circulated within U.S. music cultures since the early days of mass-produced sound recordings.⁸ Most of the “obsessed” or “addicted” listeners and collectors I met were men, and most invested considerable affective labor into – and in turn derived equal affective value from – their music recording collections. The occasional appearance of women throughout the pages of this study points to the fact that several prominent LES scene participants were women. Many in the scene regard Stephanie Stone, the widow of Irving Stone (for whom the venue “The Stone” is named), as a serious listener and a beloved presence in the Downtown music world. Yuko Otomo often reads her poetry at avant-jazz performances (see Chapter 1) and is similarly recognized as an important and veteran member of the scene. Anthony Basich called Barbara Burch, his friend and co-volunteer, “the eyes, ears, mind and beating heart of [the music series] Neues Kabarett.” Other women participate in the scene as dedicated listeners and co-creators (poets, dancers, visual artists). From

⁷ Schloss (2004: 79-100) notes the circulation of similar narratives about collecting and tropes of addiction and obsession within hip-hop communities: producers consider themselves record “junkies” and admit that records provide a failsafe topic for social talk among hip-hop practitioners.

⁸ John Gennari (2006) argues that, by the 1930s, a subculture of connoisseurs and collectors had accumulated around jazz performance and recording. Many prominent jazz critics emerged from this connoisseur subculture.

my observations, the proportion of female musicians in the LES avant-jazz scene is greater than that in mainstream New York scenes, and crucially, women are not limited to vocalist roles.⁹

But there are significant differences along lines of gender in the way scene participants talked about and practiced listening and collecting. Roberta Berger remarked that, while she enjoys acquiring jazz recordings, her husband, Richard, is “more of a collector.” Both Steve Dalachinsky and Steve Holtje are married to women who care and think about music a great deal, yet who wryly look upon the foibles of their “obsessed” husbands. Women such as Roberta Berger, Barbara Burch, and Yuko Otomo were able to perform and externalize their connoisseurship, but they didn’t seem to *want* to inhabit the role of the addict or the obsessive collector/listener in the way that many men on the scene did.

Most of my female interlocutors made explicit their awareness of the predominance of men on the scene. They typically expressed this awareness with a sense of ambivalence. One (straight) female interlocutor joked about the overwhelming majority of men by claiming that she figured she could “at least get laid” if she kept attending performances and volunteering. This same interlocutor observed that the LES scene was not nearly as male-dominated in late 2009 as it had been when she started to explore avant-jazz during the mid-1990s.

⁹ Here is an unsystematic and partial list of women who were active avant-jazz musicians while I was engaged in fieldwork: pianist Sylvie Courvoisier, pianist Connie Crothers, bassist Shayna Dulberger, multi-reedist Kali Z. Fasteau, guitarist Mary Halvorson, saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, saxophonist Matana Roberts, saxophonist Catherine Sikora, singer Fay Victor.

While I strove, during fieldwork, to be mindful of how gender dynamics might enable certain interactions while foreclosing others, my subject position as a white man in his late twenties most likely shaped my encounters and interactions. My own jazz-listener *habitus* was formed, with the occasional exception, in the company of men. Perhaps existing codes of gender performance influenced scene members *and* me. It may have felt like the path of least resistance for other men in the scene and me to inhabit the ritualized social performances of listening and collecting *towards* one another, thereby reproducing the masculinism that seems to hold sway in so many jazz cultures.

4.11 The Feel of the Habitus of Listening

...On an early-autumn night in 2009, we speak to one another. I have seen him for months various avant-jazz gigs: Kevin, the tall, thin, ponytailed, white man who can be found, if he is present, in the first row, wearing unremarkable clothes and a frown of concentration. Kevin comes up, introduces himself, says he sees me at a lot of music shows. We are in McCarren Hall in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It's an erstwhile warehouse that has been converted into a music performance space. McCarren is set up in the manner of a black box theater, a visual reminder that we are at an experimental, non-mainstream performance event. We are attending the penultimate night of the New Languages Festival, an event showcasing jazz musicians who work outside or on the edges of the mainstream; many of them have played the RUCMA series at least once. We talk about experimental jazz in New York, our listening habits, deceased musicians, recent shows. Part of the point of our conversation seems to be the acknowledgment of what

each of us already knew about the other: that, through our frequent attendance of gigs and our socializing with other listeners and with musicians, we are regular participants in the LES avant-jazz scene (though our reasons differ).

During our conversation, which we intermittently pick up in between tunes and sets, Kevin tells me about his live listening regimen. He drives from New Jersey, where he lives and works, into lower Manhattan and Brooklyn to listen to performances of avant-jazz and other styles of experimental music. Counting the travel time, these are long, even arduous nights. But he tells me he makes the time and the commitment because the music is worth it. He tries to volunteer at the Stone as much as he can; that way he gets to hear the music for free. He has little tolerance for people who talk and make noise that interferes with his hearing of a musical performance. "...That's why I sit in the first row – because nobody is gonna make noise that close to the bandstand, and also because the music is close enough that I'll hear it more easily than the talking. I can't be distracted by that bullshit. When I go to music, I'm serious about it; I want to be able to listen and concentrate."

We now "know" each other, even if neither of us knows much beyond the plainly obvious (that we both go to music a lot) or the mundanely factual (I'm a graduate student and live in Harlem; Kevin's job allows him to work from his computer at home). But making contact matters. In between sets, I walk with Kevin across the street to his car, where he opens the trunk, produces a CD-R, and hands it to me. It's a copy of a Julius Hemphill album he wants me to have (—we've just been talking about the profundity of

Hemphill's music). I'm surprised by his generosity and ask if he's sure I should take it. "Yeah, I've got it at home. Besides, man, it's about the music, right?" ...

§

Some of the practices that give rise to the listening *habitus* in the LES scene have a feel to them, a typical affective state, or range of affects, with which they are imbued. The male-dominated histories of record collecting and jazz connoisseurship in the United States and the tropes of the "addicted" or "obsessed" collector or listener that animate those histories can account for some of the contours and textures of those affects. The practice of collecting recordings or listening experiences can feel like an obsession, even a passion in the sense of the word's Latin root, "suffering." Collecting can also feel like competition: scene members notice how often they see one another at performances and note *who* goes to hear *which* performances. Collecting can also feel like a noble or virtuous kind of work: as I mention above, LES scene participants, like those in other music subcultures, derive pleasure from the feeling that they belong to a select few who "get it." Assembling your aural experiences into narratives is both a labor and a reward. You've already done the work that yields the raw materials of listening and interpretation from which to craft a narrative; it's work that is both aesthetically pleasurable and tiring in several possible ways – intellectually, physically, emotionally. But then, there is the work of crafting and mobilizing your narratives. Now you must find the right ways of *talking about* that incredible set you heard at the Stone; and you have to keep your relationships with other listeners afloat. Otherwise, whom will you tell your stories to?

As I unfold my sense of the *habitus of listening*, I am interested in putting the notion of *habitus* into dialogue with insights from affect theory. If LES scene members *work* at their listening by building collections and creating and circulating narratives, this work involves affective labor as much as it does material labor.¹⁰ By “affective labor,” I mean the effort, time, and resources LES scene members put into producing affective states that can be “consumed” by the laborer as well as by other scene members. An example of this would be the time and effort Kevin, mentioned above, puts in to diligently attending avant-jazz performances. This work presumably yields various affective results that he wishes to “consume,” such as the sensual pleasure and intellectual stimulation he feels when listening to the music. But his work also produces forms of what Bourdieu (1984) considered symbolic or cultural capital, such as knowledge about musicians, musical styles, discographies, current events in the avant-jazz scene, that Kevin may then “barter” within the LES scene’s symbolic economy of aural/musical knowledge. This is not merely a fancy way of saying that Kevin attains jazz connoisseurship through the hours of work he puts in to the project, though that is part of what happens. By describing

¹⁰ Hardt and Negri see the increased visibility of “affective labor” as symptomatic of the shift to service economies in most of the world’s richest and most powerful nations. They provide a lucid definition of affective labor: “Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labor, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character, and ‘prosocial’ behavior as the primary skills employees need. A worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker is adept at affective labor” (Hardt and Negri 2004:108). While Hardt and Negri specifically attend to affect as a commodity with exchange-value, I am interested in using their basic premise of “labor that produces or manipulates affects,” but in a different sense from the ways they do. I wish to highlight the ways that listeners *work* on feelings.

these social processes and the relationships they produce under the rubric of “affective labor,” my goal is to pay close attention to the feelings that come with both possessing the cultural capital of connoisseurship for oneself *and* beholding another’s possession of that capital.

Theories that locate affects as *immanent in* social life and history, rather than as forces beyond or before the discursive and the social, are particularly relevant here. In both Bourdieu’s original definition and Judith Becker’s implementation, *habitus* points to the ways that everyday human practices can have a “natural” feel to them, as things we just seem to do and ways we just seem to be, without deliberately thinking about it too much. While we may not be entirely conscious of the ways our habitus shapes our practices, the concept of habitus, as described by Bourdieu, acknowledges the crucial roles of culture and history in mediating our seemingly “natural” and “real” experiences and shaping our practices. I see “affect” and “habitus” as doing similar theoretical work in the way that both concepts enable attention to the constant interplay of *felt immediacy* and the discursive constructions of those feelings in human experience. My interest in narrative/collecting practices precludes my employing a theory that defines affect as residing completely outside the realms of subjectivity and the discursive, and hence outside social position, history, class, and ideology. Therefore, I align myself with scholars who locate the force of affects within the realm of the sociopolitical (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Flatley 2008; Gray 2013; Mazzarella 2009; Stewart 2007).

4.2 Telling Stories: Collecting, Narrative, and Collecting Narratives about Collecting

During our afternoon of record shopping, Brad Farberman and I veer off into a discussion about some of the musicians who regularly appear in the RUCMA series at the Local 269. While walking south to Academy Records from the southwestern corner of Midtown, we pick up some threads of conversation from phone call a few days before. Brad had told me that he'd "rather listen to middle-aged black men play free jazz than younger white guys." We affirm each other in rapid exchanges of talk that Brad's conviction is about historicity and artistic lineage. Brad would rather hear black musicians who have been performing since the 1970s because they both lived through the social upheavals of the "long 1960s" and can trace their musical pedagogy to the innovators of avant-garde jazz, such as Don Cherry or Cecil Taylor. I contrast a younger, white musician whom Brad knows on a personal basis – a skilled player who does not possess the same kind of link to the emergence of the jazz avant-garde – with William Parker, who cut his teeth playing as a sideman for Cecil Taylor and other luminaries of the "original" 1960s avant-garde. This causes Brad to recall Steve Dalachinsky's "Cecil story":

B: Even Dalachinsky tells that story about when he was a little kid and he peaked into the Five Spot to see Cecil—

M: Yeah, man, that story—

B: What?

M: It's funny just because I've known him for 8 months and I've heard him tell that story so many times [*B laughs*] and with so many variations—

B: —Well that's his link. He's linking himself. [M: I know] He just wants to show you that he was there.

M: And he can't decide how old he was and he can't decide where it happened, but he just keeps telling the story. Like if it were something that important to me I would've remembered the year! . . It's like [he's telling about] when he lost his jazz virginity.

B: Right.

M: Or at least his free jazz virginity.

B: I sort of remember when I lost mine.

M: No, I do as well.

B: I saw, I told you [M: at UMass, right] yeah, at UMass they have a free jazz series—and I write—so this was the week I went to the paper and I said, “I wanna write” and they said, “What do you wanna write about?” and I said, “Uh, I dunno, when I was in high school I actually wrote about news” and they said, “So you wanna do news?” and I said, “Actually, how about music?” They said, “Sure, what do you like?” I said, “I like jazz.” They said, “Go to this jazz concert.” I said, “Great!”

Our mutual familiarity with Dalachinsky's story comes as a result of his reiterations of it in conversation with other LES scene participants. Though Steve himself admits to being unsure of the year it happened, his memory has preserved a crucial a image: he stood outside a bar and peered inside to see the source of sounds he didn't understand. Like many distant memories, this one blurs the distinction between the recollection of an event and the recollection of emotion and affective experience. As Brad rightly notes, the story allows Dalachinsky to give empirical evidence that he was around and bore witness to the emergence of avant-garde jazz in the early '60s. Telling it to other participants in the LES avant-jazz scene is almost like displaying his credentials; the story is a certificate of his commitment to the music and its history. Told to various members

of the scene, Dalachinsky's story takes on a life of its own. He no longer needs to speak it himself or be present for it to be reiterated.

Most scene participants whom I asked had similar narratives of discovery or epiphany. Moreover, they were not surprised when I asked if they could tell me about their introduction to avant-jazz, or if they recalled the moment when the music clicked for them, and implicitly understood the relevance of such a query. Jazz listeners seem to be sure to craft one of these stories in order to have it ready to hand. They operate on the assumption that their fellow listeners will most likely have similar stories to tell. Collectively, these discovery narratives comprise a meta-trope, a story that jazz-heads tell themselves about themselves.

While we visit Academy Records on 18th Street just west of 5th Ave, Brad finds an old LP that he decides he must purchase. It is a recording titled *So Nobody Else Can Hear* (Cobb 1980), led by drummer Jimmy Cobb, featuring Gregory Hines and Bill Cosby, and arranged by Peewee Ellis.¹¹ Earlier in the day, Brad had identified an important facet of his motivations for record collecting: "I want to hear something unusual...I'm also looking for something rare because I'm a crazy record person like that." After we leave Academy, Brad explained his reason for purchasing the Jimmy Cobb record:

BF: So this Jimmy Cobb record - fits the bill, man. First, I've never heard of it before, so that's cool, cause I was like, "Whoa!" I didn't even know this record existed; had no idea. [MS: Right] Second, it's pretty fuckin' weird. It's got this tap dancer doing vocals - is he a tap dancer, Gregory Hines?

MS: Uh, he's a dancer; I think he can sing, though. [BF: Oh, okay] I think he's like that old-style triple threat, like he can sing and dance and act. 'Cause you know

¹¹ *So Nobody Else Can Hear* is actually a sound-recording release of a music video project that originally aired on the A&E network in 1986. See <http://www.jimmycobb.net/solowork.html>

he acted as well, he was in a couple movies. He's probably best known as a dancer—

BF: So it's Gregory Hines and Bill Cosby. That's fucking great right there. And then, Freddie Hubbard and Peewee Ellis, who are two horn players I love; plus then it's Peewee Ellis who arranged the album, and of course I love Peewee Ellis because he was in all of James Brown's best bands [MS: Right] So . this is a winning record. Like, even if I don't *like* it it's awesome! [MS: Can't go wrong] Can't go wrong, right! Like some records, even if—

MS: Wait, even if you don't like the music? What is its value then?

BF: It's an oddity. [MS: right] And I have it to analyze [*inaudible*] cause I like analyzing things.

As is typical with collectors, Brad invests the recording in question with a value beyond the aesthetic merit of the music it contains. His existing knowledge of jazz discography enables him to identify the unusual combination of artists who collaborated to make *So Nobody Else Can Hear*. By purchasing the record, he not only possesses this “oddity” of recorded jazz history, he possesses a souvenir of the moment in which he discovered the recording. As a souvenir of that moment, the LP also gives physical form to the *thrill* of that discovery. He will be glad to own this LP and keep it in his collection even if he finds the music therein to be uninspiring. This value is culturally determined: as both a performer and a listener, Brad anticipates that his knowledge of *So Nobody* will increase his cultural capital with other performers/listeners.¹²

Of course, Brad's perception of the music's aesthetics is itself culturally mediated; like any jazz aficionado or participant in a music culture, his process of evaluating

¹² Stylistically, *So Nobody* presents a mix of post-bop jazz and soul/R&B. Most of the songs are played with the swing rhythmic feel typical of mainstream post-bop jazz. Several song arrangements include backing from a string orchestra. Vocals employ smooth timbres, vibrato, and precise intonation, and thus reside within the stylistic continuum ranging from jazz to R&B. The inclusion of electric keyboards processed through a phaser stylistically marks the recording as being from the late '70s or early '80s.

musical sound is informed by interactions he has had with other listeners and musicians. Even within the realm of sound, Brad's words suggest a parsing of music aesthetics. If it turns out that he does not enjoy listening to *So Nobody* as much as he does a favorite recording by, say, Miles Davis, he anticipates he that would still derive an intellectual and aesthetic pleasure from "analyzing" the recording. Even if the record were an artistic "failure," the constellation of participants would make it a fascinating historical document for Brad. The cultural valuation at work here follows a simple principle of economics: the more rare a commodity, the greater its exchange value. Had Cobb made several recordings featuring Cosby, Ellis, Hines and Hubbard, and were Brad aware of such recordings, the value of *So Nobody* would diminish for Brad. But this is, to Brad's knowledge, the only instance of collaboration among these musicians, and so the recording is a "find."¹³

I ask if Brad values the recording because of its rarity, that is, because it would enable him to perform his connoisseurship among other listeners. He initially denies this, but cuts himself off with a more pensive "maybe." He continues:

But I'll tell you how I see myself with ownership of things. I see my collection as something that I—it's a personal library that now I have unlimited access to....I'm searching for a musical knowledge that will serve me, as an improviser and composer and performer, and this [*inaudible*] library will serve me in those things. So this is like another piece of the library that I've conquered, cause I've listened to it. And it's there if I ever need it.

¹³ Note also that Brad would not be as excited to purchase *So Nobody* if the recording had been available as a CD reissue, even if he were still intellectually stimulated by the unusual personnel on the date. Susan Stewart notes: "The souvenir distinguishes experiences. *We do not need and desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable*" (1993: 135, my italics).

Like those of other recording connoisseurs, Brad's record collection reifies his listening labor. It is a purposeful materialization of his cumulative efforts to seek out unfamiliar music recordings and listen to them. Susan Stewart's theorization of the social and affective valences of collections and souvenirs is relevant here. Stewart defines collections as complementary to souvenirs: "The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection" (151). Stewart also sees collections as juxtaposition of "personal time with social time, autobiography with history" (154). Brad's explanation of his record collection is typical of LES-scene participants in the ways it conflates Stewart's notions of the collection and souvenir. It is a multiplicity of objects that accrue further meaning due to their relationship. Crucially attached to and arising from Brad's record collection is a narrative of Brad himself: his collection is both a mnemonic for and a congealment of the time he has spent seeking, studying, and listening to music recordings.

The obscurity of *So Nobody Else Can Hear* affirms the narrative Brad wants his record collection to tell. It is a narrative of a curious, industrious listener, one whose habits and practices of consuming music are inflected by his pursuits as a performing musician and composer, and, importantly, a listener who knows the mainstreams well enough that he now seeks out marginal recordings. This is partly why he is more likely to acquire recordings that feature musicians whom he personally knows; placed within his "personal library," such recordings can each serve as souvenirs of his social relations with

fellow musicians. They may serve as evidence of his status as a musician; they give tactile form to the ineffable substance of social relations.

The Economics of Collecting

Brad Farberman approaches shopping for recordings strategically. The pleasure of discovering new sounds, of expanding his understanding of recorded jazz history through this discovering, is imbricated with the pleasure of finding bargains. He wants to spend as little money as possible. He wants to be able to trade in the LPs and CDs he's carrying and get maximum trade value for them. Ideally, he will only barter his recordings for new acquisitions, and not spend any cash. His economic goals in collecting overlap with his preferences of what to acquire. While we are in Norman's Sound and Vision - a store on the Bowery near St. Mark's Place - he points out a few records that interest him because of their obscurity and their relatively low price. Records that exhibit unexpected combinations of musicians, that have not made it to reissue on CD, and that are not recognized as "collectors' items" (and hence inexpensively priced) are what Brad is always chasing after. That is, Brad would not be interested in purchasing a recording only as a visual or tactile object; he does not want LPs to which he would never want to listen and which would become "mantelpiece decorations", as he puts it. He is looking for obscure recordings that will be of musical and sonic interest to him.

Musicians will often barter their own recordings with each other. If a musician receives 20 complimentary copies of an album on which he has lead credits, he will often "give away" copies to friends and fellow musicians. The recipients may offer their

recordings in return, and so these “gifts” are often reciprocated. On several occasions, I witnessed Steve Dalachinsky engage in this kind of bartering. He would either offer a recording of which he had more than one copy, or one of his books of poetry or collages, in exchange for a recording he wanted to acquire. On several occasions, I purchased some CDs from Steve. These were often ESP-Disk releases; he received multiple copies of new releases or reissues as compensation for his emcee work at the ESP-disk showcases in the Bowery Poetry Club. Steve also saves duplicate copies of CDs (ESP-Disk or others) in order to sell them at some time in the future.

The trend that emerges when considering these observations in tandem is an absence of actual *money*. This is because, for the listeners I mention, \$10 in cash holds a greater value than a \$10 CD. One of the most obvious and (hopefully) graceful ways for me to show my appreciation to interviewees was to compensate them for their time by purchasing some of their recordings, books, or images (in the cases where an interviewee had created such objects). This way, I acquired the artistic production of research participants while implicitly showing respect for their musicianship. In turn, they were able to make some money by selling off extra copies of their recordings, which might otherwise lie around their homes for a while, waiting for a purpose.

4.21 Narrating Obsession: the Addiction to Affect and the Affect of Addiction

“We find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others, that have already been shaped or put into circulation, and that are already there around us”
(Flatley 2008:5)

Over the course of fieldwork, I learned about the prevalence of obsessive and addicted listeners. These tortured aficionados became familiar to me through both empirical examples of specific listeners and abstracted, narrative tropes.¹⁴ If you're *serious* about your listening, you're always looking for the next musical high, the next aural fix. Within New York, the various and overlapping scenes devoted to anti-commercial, experimental musical styles provide the really serious listener with many options. Perversely, this plenitude can become the cause of anxiety rather than celebration. Sometimes it feels like there are *too many* performances you could check out on any given night. Then there is the endless onslaught of new recordings that you could (and probably *should*) sample and acquire. How do you keep up with all of it? How do you decide what to focus on in the limited amount of "downtime" you have to listen to music and partake in the scene? You can start to obsess over it all. What is supposed to be a pleasurable antidote to your stultifying office job (if that's how you pay the bills) or an inspiration for your own creative work becomes an abrasive monkey on your back. This music you love should be nourishing you, ears, mind, body, and soul; instead, it has become that unsolvable problem you that keeps you ridden with guilt.

Various listeners joked about being "addicted" and "obsessed" when describing the large amounts of mental, emotional, and physical energy they spend listening to and staying aware of the goings-on in the broader jazz world, and particularly in the LES avant-jazz scene. The jokes give verbal form to the pleasurable aspects of desire: you want

¹⁴ Ellen Gray (2013) attends to a similar phenomenon among *fado* fans in Lisbon, who share affective attachments to the genre by circulating tropes of pathos and suffering and by figuring the archetypal fan as seized by a passion.

to hear more, to understand “what is happening in jazz” better, to have your eardrums touched and moved by vibrating air molecules in pleasurable ways. The jokes also point to the pain inherent in a chronic state of unabated desire. Flowing into the pleasurable yearning to hear more is a constant trickle of disappointment, a succession of little letdowns – because that performance was good, but not as good as you’d hoped. The hours you spend thinking about which performances to attend, what recordings to buy, how to organize your music collection in space and your listening practices in time, make it all feel more like work and less like the “leisure” activity that neoliberal capitalism tells you it is.

Once an obsessed listener forms a collection of aural-musical experiences, the collection must be maintained, curated. If stored away in your mind, the collection may corrode, become moldy, gather cobwebs. Bringing the collection into contact with other listeners, while risking its erstwhile shape, organization, and integrity, keeps it alive and healthy. Your collection of aural experiences needs exposure to other listeners, like a plant needs sunlight. But just as too much sunlight, or an improper kind of exposure to sunlight, can kill a plant, the wrong kind of social exposure can harm your collection. If you talk about my listening with another listener who turns out to be unsympathetic, whose views on music conflict with yours, it can be a traumatic experience. Your perception of your experiences can suffer as a result.

The perceivable diligence of their listening habits causes some scene participants to have the label of “obsessed listener” conferred upon them. Others admit, with a self-deprecation that cloaks a secret or not-so-secret pride, to being “addicted listeners.”

There is a dialectical or dialogic relationship between their collections of listening experiences and their interactions with other listeners. Sociality around listening and the sociality of listening together help reshape and restructure their collections. In turn, they summon items from their collections in order to mark their status as serious, dedicated, and possibly “obsessed” listeners.

Building a record collection (by whatever means) and attending music performances are technologies of collecting and amassing a résumé of aural experience. Bringing that collecting or résumé into the arena of the social is part of the purpose of the collection. While participants are busy building and maintaining their own collections of aural experience, they continually evaluate the collections of others. Participants notice how often they see each other at gigs, which gigs a listener chooses to attend. They listen for which musicians someone discusses, what kinds of music-analytical comparisons one can make when listening to a musician one is hearing for the first time.

§

“If I had to give it all up tomorrow, as long as I could put on [John Coltrane’s albums] *Interstellar Space* or *My Favorite Things*, THAT’s where I wanna be back to[...] I wanna be a happy listener who knows what I love the best [...] I’ve completely lost clarity over what’s good and what’s not good [...] More than two thirds of what I go to hear now, I wouldn’t go to hear it. It doesn’t fulfill me,” Steve Dalachinsky confesses as we sit on a sunny patio in back of a coffee shop across the street from his and Yuko’s home on Spring St. It’s a warm August afternoon and I’m recording our conversation. The talk is not formal enough to be called an interview, but Steve is influenced by the presence of the

digital audio recorder. To say he is putting on a show would discredit the sincerity of his words, but he does speak with dramatic and humorous flair. The tone with which he utters his words is intensified somewhat for effect, but he is pointing to a sincere dilemma he has wrestled with for quite some time.

The previous night Steve had found himself facing a common and agonizing decision: which gig to hear and which to skip. He was at the Jazz Gallery where the Chicago-based jazz musician Ken Vandermark was playing two sets. After the first set, which Steve said was “perfectly okay,” he had to decide whether to stay or to leave to hear saxophonist Matana Roberts lead a set at the Local 269. Steve ended up staying at the Jazz Gallery for Vandermark’s set, but he admits that he barely heard the music because he was plagued by doubt and regret for having not gone to hear Roberts. He noticed that about two thirds of the Jazz Gallery audience cleared out after Vandermark’s first set, and he was convinced “it was because they went to see *Matana!!*” Yuko and I both laugh at this.

Though he tempers his talk with doses of self-deprecating humor, the undercurrent of frustration is unmistakable. He is frustrated by his own compulsive behavior – this perpetual need to check out as many jazz gigs as possible, to keep up with all the goings-on within the realm of experimental music. He is frustrated by his realization that nowadays he often doesn’t *hear* when he is in the audience. He is frustrated that he lets this obsessive behavior pull him to go hear music that, if he’s honest with himself, he doesn’t really like. *More than two thirds of what I go to hear now, I*

wouldn't go to hear it. In the hypothetical situation in which Steve “had to give it all up tomorrow,” he would sacrifice most of his recent experiences of live performances.

Implicit in Steve's confession is a sense of ownership, of collecting. Even when listening to live performances, he builds a collection of experiences. Nowadays, he feels most of those experiences have been mediocre enough to merit forfeiture, yet he mentally records his impressions of mediocrity and therefore still claims some form of ownership over these experiences. Mixed with Steve's feelings of frustration – of being stuck between a rock and a hard place, of being driven by an urge he cannot control, of constantly attending gigs he does not expect to enjoy – is a powerful dose of nostalgia. This is not nostalgia for some vague, imagined past shared by many; this is nostalgia for a past moment in his history as a listener. He wants to “be back to” past moments of listening which he now remembers as “pure” (his and Yuko's words). Embedded within his yearning for the experience of listening to the Coltrane albums he names is a wish to return to a listening ethos he feels he has lost, the listener he used to be – one who knew his tastes and listened in absorption, who was more concerned about the sounds he was hearing than about those he might be missing elsewhere, one who lost himself in his listening acts and was absorbed by performances. Dalachinsky wants to reincarnate that more “pure” listener in the place of his current listening self, which accumulates auditory experiences as though they were credit-card reward points.

During this same conversation, Steve and Yuko both employ the words “obsession” and “addict” or “addiction” in reference to Steve's listening habits. Steve has told me of his past forays into substance abuse, and so the phrase “listening addict” is not

merely a flip turn of phrase, but a joke that bears resonances of a former reality. Steve has analyzed his own psychology and concluded that he is someone with an addictive personality who has substituted concert attendance, or gig hopping (the more poetically illustrative term), for mind-altering substances. He sees himself as one among several, if not many, addicted listeners who participate in the LES avant-jazz scene. On other occasions, he compared the social dynamics of addicted listeners to alcoholics. Just as certain alcoholics only know each other and socialize in the bar, in the context of drinking, he knows several fellow listening addicts only through gigs, and has only spoken to them at gigs.

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“Classical is in completely different order than all of my other stuff. Classical is in chronological [by the composer’s birthdate] – which is *definitely* insane,” Steve Holtje says with deadpan delivery. I laugh.

We have moved from the hallway, where Holtje keeps his many thousands of jazz and rock CDs, into his “classical room.” We stand in a smallish, box-shaped room off the kitchen of the apartment Holtje shares with his wife and cats. The room is well lit and packed tight with recordings and big, thick books – classical and jazz recording guides, discographical tomes. Shelves reaching from floor to ceiling line the walls of the room; they house CDs and LPs. Boxes and crates are stacked in front of some of the shelves, making the small room a miniature labyrinth. The clutter of the room reminds me of used bookstores where the surplus of inventory overflows from the shelves into piles on

the floor. I gingerly walk through the room to avoid knocking over a crate of vintage LPs or toppling a stack of heavy books.

This room houses Holtje's recordings in the "classical" genre. He has arranged the totality of his recording collection in the manner of a record store; sections of his home correspond to specific genres. The long hallway, which is lined with the same kind of shelving units as the "classical room," houses jazz recordings. The effect of this is peculiar, but not unfamiliar. The walls look as though they are made of shelves, as opposed to more conventional building materials such as drywall, wood, steel, and paint. Among these shelves, I cannot find an inch of space where Holtje could place any more CDs he might acquire, though I know he will acquire more. Branching off of the hallway a few feet beyond the apartment's entryway sits a room with more floor-to-ceiling shelving, in this instance containing some books but mainly housing CDs: rock, blues, other "popular" genres. A landscape painting, measuring about 18 by 24 inches, sits upon an easel in this room. A large window looks out onto the front yard and sidewalk. The space feels like it should be a living room, but the easel and a sleeping mat on the floor make things ambiguous. The room actually doubles as bedroom and living room for Steve and his wife.

Holtje's quip about the "insanity" of how he organizes his classical collection is typical; he fills the narration accompanying the tour of his record collection with bits of self-deprecating humor.

"I have 96 different versions of Brahms' First Symphony," he says drily.

"Is that the most that you have of any piece?" I ask.

“Yes.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s one of my favorite pieces...but I also got a an earlier start on that one; I acquired that obsession from a friend.”

Self-deprecation again, but here as elsewhere the wry humor is one ingredient in a mix that also includes pride. Holtje refers more than once to his “obsessiveness.” But he is proud of his collection, proud that he knows his recordings and has listened to most, though not all, of them. Holtje has made a choice to “own” the persona of the opinionated music connoisseur. His work as a music critic has helped him to cultivate this persona. The humor helps him achieve distance from the social archetype will still inhabiting the role.

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Holtje and I have been listening, for about a minute and a half, to a live recording of Billy Harper’s group performing the leader’s composition, “Priestess.” He makes intermittent, short comments about the music. He pauses in his observations about Harper, his band, and the musical events as we hear them in real time to make a more broadly reflective comment: “Of course one of the things about listening is that you’re always chasing the perfect experience, and none of them are. Or few of them are, some of them aren’t. You get lucky once in a while.”

Holtje’s use of the second-person pronoun “you” to rhetorically act in the fourth person – that is, without a specific referent – is appropriate for his point here. He is relating a desire that drives his own listening practices but by wielding a non-specific

pronoun and using the indicative mood he is also making an authoritative claim about other avid (or as Holtje himself might put it, “obsessive”) listeners; he’s telling me, “This is the way things are with people like us.” Compare Holtje’s epigrammatic gloss on the condition of the dedicated listener with Steve Dalachinsky’s near-confession about the compulsive and addict-like manner in which he attends live gigs and collects recordings: “If I had to give it all up tomorrow, as long as I could put on [Coltrane’s albums] *Interstellar Space* or *My Favorite Things*, THAT’s where I wanna be back to...”

“...*you’re always chasing the perfect experience, and none of them are.*” Of course, one of the things about being an addict is that you’re always looking for the next fix. Addictive listening may not present the physiological hazards that excessive drug use does, but both Steves admit to the potential pitfalls of excessive listening. Earlier in the conversation during which Dalachinsky confessed his loss of clarity, he and his wife Yuko repeatedly uttered the words “addiction” in reference to his listening habits, usually with a humorous inflection.

Obsession. Addiction. The obsessed listener suffers from a passion for listening experiences, but it can be a noble passion. This is listening as compulsive behavior *and* wistful quest. Holtje’s rueful observation that only once in a while does the dedicated listener get lucky is laden with nostalgia for previous listening experiences, those “perfect” experiences that he has been careful to store in his memory. Attali (1985) famously, and somewhat cynically, defines the act of record collecting as one in which the collector, in buying the products of musicians’ labor, *stockpiles* their labor-time; in his view the collector/listener foolishly gives in to an unresolvable desire to accumulate music, even

though the collector spends more and more of his *own* time collecting and working (to fund his collecting habit) than actually *listening* to the music he has collected (1985: 101). Both Dalachinsky and Holtje complicate Attali's thesis. They readily admit to owning more recordings than they have time to listen to, but their consumption of objects encoding music-filled time does not necessarily grant them any feeling of power. To chase the perfect listening experience is to consume moments of musical audition – be they at home, in a club, or in a concert hall – with the hope that an external stimulus will provide the much-desired aural high. And though Holtje, Dalachinsky, and other listeners may resemble Sisyphus or a junky in their pursuit of the perfect listening experience, construing their endeavor as futile only gives a partial view of what is going on and does not fully address why they do it.

Steve and Yuko once let me in on their code word for those aesthetes – listeners and consumers of other expressive forms – who they conclude are “obsessed.” They call these people “schpountzes,” a reference to the French film *Le Schpountz* (Pagnol et al. 1938), about a naive proletarian in France who dreams of making it big in the cinema. In French, “schpountz” is a term used to label a person gullible, or self-centered, or a bumpkin. It implies some lack of awareness of one's own position or of the social reality within which one lives. This private joke represents their ambivalent attitude toward those would aspire to the condition of connoisseurs.

In their view, there is a balance to be found. For them the true “connoisseur” is someone who maintains control over the intensity of his desire to hear more; the connoisseur wants to collect, but knows what he likes and doesn't like. The connoisseur

masters aesthetic judgment and does not let the affective pull of collecting overtake that evaluative capacity. The addict, in contrast, has fallen into the trap of perpetually listening more and more often. The addict collects only to collect; he attends performances but may not even concentrate on hearing while at a performance. For Yuko and Steve, the “schpountz” is a close relative of the addict. The schpountz has become so taken with one or several styles, scenes, or genres that he loses touch with reality. A schpountz of avant-jazz might project an air of gravitas about his listening habits to the point of unintentional comedy, or he might approach the task of listening in a constant daze of naïve and boundless admiration, or both.

When a record collection begins to take up significant amounts of space in one’s home – as it does in the homes of Steve Dalachinsky, Steve Holtje, and other scene members – Benjamin’s and Stewart’s theory that a collection is about its owner becomes a very material reality. If one’s choices in decorating a home are indicative of narratives and conceptions of self, the choice to dedicate large amounts of interior space (an especially precious commodity in New York City) to sound recordings affirms the relevance of these objects, and more importantly the memories and emotions articulated to these objects, to the collector’s sense of self.

4.22 Documentarian Impulses: Collecting Live Moments

Within the range of collecting practices I observed in the LES scene, an impulse to document performances represented a practice more specific to the scene. Several of these photographers and filmmakers are professionals, while others are amateurs. Digital social

media technologies that emerged during the 2000s facilitate the circulation of this documentary material. Youtube searches for the names of prominent avant-jazz musicians and the venues mentioned in Chapter 2 will yield plenty of live video footage of avant-jazz performances.¹⁵ The prevalence of documentary practices – in particular videography and photography – arises from convictions that performances of avant-jazz constitute a form of cultural production and an expressive tradition deserving of wider recognition and preservation. Again, the practice of collecting becomes inflected by listener-documentarians' sense that they pursue a noble or righteous endeavor. The extreme diligence with which certain videographers carry out these practices of documenting performances of avant-jazz is enabled by the mass marketing of digital media and audio-visual technologies. With the increasing affordability of video recorders and cameras of decreasing size, it becomes easier to shoot video footage and photographs of performances night after night.

The political economy of avant-jazz also enables this trend of documentation. As I have mentioned, the Stone only allows designated documentarians to film, record and

¹⁵ Several videographers have user channels on youtube.com that archive many of their videos of avant-jazz (Robert O'Haire - YouTube n.d.; Punkcast n.d.; Kjureilly n.d.; Don Mount n.d.). Photographers active in the LES scene have similarly made their work available to the public via the Internet (Member Scott Friedlander n.d.; Gannushkin n.d.; John Rogers NYC Photography n.d.). Typically, this material conforms to the aesthetic codes of documentary film and photography. Most videos are typically shot from within the audience, and therefore replicate the vantage point of an audience member. The sound quality varies depending on performance conditions and (presumably) the equipment each videographer uses. For instance, Robert O'Haire, who is a professional filmmaker and sound recordist, produces high-definition videos with relatively clear sound. Photography of the avant-jazz scene adheres to standards of documentary and reportage photography: musicians and their instruments are the focus of the compositions. Photographers might use black and white, different levels of graininess, and subtle variations in color saturation for expressive effect, but in general they create realist portraits. The complex flows of visual and audio reproductions of avant-jazz performances on the Internet could form the basis of an entire project, and an in-depth analysis of this media culture is beyond the scope of the present study.

photograph. But the Local 269, the Brecht Forum and other venues and events (including, notably, the Vision Festival) did not place prohibitions on video or photo documentation during performances. It would not be possible for amateur videographers to record performances of musicians who hold contracts with major record labels and perform in music venues that exercise more control over the performance environment (e.g., the Village Vanguard, the Jazz Standard, the Blue Note). In contrast to the circulation of “bootleg” recordings – unofficial recordings “illegally” made by amateur and recordists – videographers filmed performances at the Local 269, the Brecht Forum, and other venues with the permission and even encouragement of the musicians performing.¹⁶ Steve Dalachinsky admitted that he “got into the recording thing for a while,” referring to a period when, inspired by other sound recordists who were creating vast archives of unofficial jazz recordings, he would audio-record avant-jazz performances and created a personal archive of these tapes. He spoke about it as a fad in which he temporarily became absorbed. I, too, felt the power of suggestion during fieldwork. I was already taking photos as mnemonics to help me write more detailed fieldnotes and to supplement my written observations. After several months of participant-observation in the LES scene, I began share some of my photos with the musicians they depicted via email and Facebook. The musicians were uniformly grateful for the photos; I never once worried that they would confront me for reproducing their image without their permission.

¹⁶ That said, I should note that there is a long history of “bootleg” recordings within jazz and other popular musical genres. Unofficial (and illegal) recordings of live performances have circulated among dedicated listeners and collectors as “bootlegs.” Owners of bootleg recordings often prize them above commercially released recordings, claiming that the bootleg which they possess documents performances superior to those sold on the official music recording market.

John Rogers, a professional photographer who specializes in live-action shots of jazz musicians, understands his work in a way that typifies the impetus for much of this documentation. Rogers told me that he got into photography in about 2004 and was told by friends and acquaintances that he had a natural way with the camera. He considers himself “more alert” when he is photographing a performance. A happy by-product of his increasing amount of work as a jazz photographer was that it got him into gigs for free. He also told me that photographing “made me feel like I was more part of the whole community rather than like a fan.”¹⁷ Filming or photographing (and, I would argue, drawing and painting) avant-jazz performances provide a means by which to actively engage in the goings-on of the LES avant-jazz scene, especially if one is not a professional musician. These practices also “activate” listening and aural experience and remove some of the stigma of “passive” consumption that they sometimes carry within the scene. They help create the sense that dedicated listening is *work*. Rogers became something more than just a “fan” when he began taking photos. The rotating cast of a handful of amateur videographers who showed up at most Local 269 and Brecht Forum performances I attended have something to show for the time they spend listening to and witnessing music performances. The Internet allows them to display their collections of music documentaries publicly, and thereby perform their dedication and connoisseurship. It is obsession, addiction, passion transformed into symbolic capital that wields exchange value in the marketplace of listening and appreciation.

¹⁷ Chapter 5 includes a more detailed consideration of Rogers’ aural experiences.

Photographers and filmmakers who document avant-jazz performances form a small but intrepid group that is highly visible both to other listeners and to scene musicians. The possibility for listeners to know musicians personally, and to become recognizable figures within the scene, gives the LES scene listeners' *habitus* some of its specificity. The shared feeling that one is part of a small group of cognoscenti, an affect that has circulated through jazz cultures since the advent of the genre (a prominent example being the 1940s trope of the hipster, as I discuss in Chapter 1), becomes intensified in the LES scene: within the small world of jazz, LES scene participants see themselves involved in an even *smaller* scene devoted to a particularly esoteric style of the already-rarified genre of jazz.

4.3 The Practice of Social Talk

...It's a cold Saturday night in January 2010, and I'm volunteering at the Brecht Forum for an installment of the Neues Kabarett series. I help Anthony Basich, Kazembe, and Ras Moshe at the makeshift bar. The three men enjoy a comfortable, established banter. Anthony intermittently assumes the position of spectator to the repartee of Ras and Kaz, who trade good-natured wisecracks with touches of the dozens.¹⁸ At one point Ras begins looking for his mobile phone and asks us if we have seen it.

¹⁸ "The dozens" is an African American expressive form in which two (usual male) speakers try to best each other through verbal insults. The insults are not meant to be taken seriously and often rely upon stock phrasing and tropes (e.g., "yo' mama's so fat...") and the emphasis is often on each speaker's execution of his verbal put-downs. The performative element of a session of the dozens is heightened by the typical presence of spectators, who often cheer on the humorous exchange. The dozens came to mind for me because Ras and Kaz, both African American men, would shift their verbal style into a more theatrical or

“It’s right in your hand!” Kaz (the nickname he goes by) says with a grin.

“Oh, man...” Ras rolls his eyes.

Kaz guffaws in response and sings, “Space is the place!” Without missing a beat, he pokes fun at Ras by singing a vocal riff from and title of a 1973 Sun Ra album (Ra and Arkestra 1973).

“Man, you know, it’s the weekends, man. I’m not like this during the week, but on the weekends I zone out,” Ras says in a slow, dry cadence.

A bit later, Ras looks at the short-brimmed fedora Kaz is wearing and remarks, “That’s a cool hat, man. Like them Dexter Gordon Blue Note covers from the 60s . . . or like Lou Donaldson.”

At some point, Kaz shows us a video on his iPod (Sun Ra Arkestra 2010). It’s concert footage of Sun Ra with an “all-star” ensemble. Sun Ra might be on Kaz’s mind today; maybe that’s why he thought of the “Space is the place!” crack so quickly. As we pass the iPod around to each have a look at the video, we talk a bit about watching the pleasures of youtube, how it has placed an infinite number of audio and video recordings at our fingertips. We chat a bit more about Sun Ra. Kaz points out that the video is from 1983. “Just type in ‘Sun Ra’ and ‘all-star’ and you’ll get it,” Kaz tells me...

...On another at the Brecht Forum in March of 2010, musicians and listeners mingle in the lobby after the night’s performances have concluded. Lisle Ellis stands at the

performative register when they poked fun at one another. Their repartee had a structured, ritualized feel to it.

bar sipping a Corona that Anthony Basich has served him. As I walk near, I gather that they are talking about bassist Jimmy Garrison.

From Lisle: "...man, that Elvin Jones record, with him [Garrison] and Joe Farrell. That is so great." Anthony agrees. Soon Ras has dropped in on the conversation.

"Oh, yeah, man—"

"Puttin' It Together. I've been looking for that on CD. You probably have it, Ras, cause you have everything good. Cause you deserve it!"¹⁹

"Yeah, I got that, man. That's a serious record."

Lisle mentions the tune "Village Greene," which is on the LP. Lisle begins scat-singing the bop-like melody; Ras joins almost immediately. A little moment of synchronicity – I feel like both Anthony and I are watching these two musicians "do their thing." When they reach the end of the phrase, there's a combination of head-nodding, smiling, and chuckling among the four of us.

"I must have listened to that record for hours! Just wore it out!" Lisle exclaims.

"And it was so well-recorded. Garrison sounds so good. I really studied his walking lines."

"What's your favorite Garrison solo?" Anthony asks Lisle. Lisle thinks about it for a few seconds.

"The intro to 'My Favorite Things' on Live at the Village Vanguard Again, man,"

Ras answers. "That shit is serious."²⁰

"66," I chime in.

¹⁹ See Jones (1968).

²⁰ See Coltrane (1966).

“Yeah, May ’66.”

“Or ‘Tapestry in Sound’,” Lisle adds.²¹

“Yeah, that’s a beautiful one,” Anthony muses.

“Not a man who played a lot of notes, but everything had so much thought in it!”

Lisle comments about Garrison. “He was one of my main influences. Mingus was probably the biggest, since I’m a composer.”

Anthony says Mingus was a great bassist.

“I know. And people often say ‘Mingus...great composer, okay bass-player’ “ – this with raised eyebrows from Lisle. Anthony’s rise in concord.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve heard people say that. I think Mingus’ bass is so powerful, so much conviction,” I add.

We agree via various short interjections, exclamations that Mingus was a force to be reckoned with on bass. Lisle notes that Mingus’ bass playing was instantly recognizable, which is the highest compliment one jazz musician can pay another (Monson 1996)...

§

The chatter in between sets, conversations over beers, talk over music issuing from the stereo: social talk that occurs in these “off the record” settings reveals facets of aural experience that are not always mentioned in more “official” registers of communication, such as interviews, concert introductions by MCs, liner notes accompanying a recording. In this section, I focus on the ways that two instances of social

²¹ See Coltrane (1994).

talk in which LES scene members call upon their narrative-collections in order to engage in the practice of genre. These instances of social talk uncover ideological agendas that circulate within the scene. In the first, humorous banter about a pop musician (Elton John) obliquely affirms a generic coherence in avant-jazz. Shared understandings of musical genres and the differences that exist among them enable this banter to do its work. The second instance concerns a moment of verbal conflict exacerbated by one of the central tenets of the avant-jazz scene's ethos – a dedication to politico-aesthetic margins, which can also be thought of as a fondness for the *rough edges* of music and culture industries.

Throughout this project, I refer to “the LES avant-jazz scene,” while in this chapter I continually return to the notion of “the *habitus* of listening” on the scene. Both formulations imply homogeneity and a monolithic quality. In spite of public and “official” discourses (such as most of the promotional copy that appears in AFA's communications and the “official” registers I mention above) that broadcast a notion of the avant-jazz scene as an example of complete solidarity and communal affinity, the scene and its *habitus* contain multiple levels of disagreement, difference, and incommensurability. My understanding of the conflict and contestation I witnessed within the LES scene and among scene participants is informed by scholarship that understands “cultures” as rife with internal contradictions and power struggles.²² As in

²² Handler (2009), Ortner (2006) and Povinelli (2001) attend to the ways that an engagement with incommensurability forms a necessary part of anthropologists' comparative inquiries across cultures and nation-states. Michael Jackson thematizes the inherent sense of struggle and conflict (at varying levels of scope and intensity) in the sustained meditation on “intersubjectivity” that forms an important facet of his scholarship (Jackson 2002b; Jackson 2002a). Though he writes about the reductive and unrealistic ways

Chapter 2, I take contestation over a genre's sonic and ideological features to be a sign of that genre's *health* (Fabbri 1983; Gennari 2006; Gray 2013; Holt 2007; Novak 2013; Turino 2008).²³ I could begin to speculate about a grim prognosis for avant-jazz's future if LES scene participants never disagreed or argued about the state of jazz in New York City, what constitutes real jazz, or the like, as that would be a sign that they no longer *cared enough* about the genre to stand up for their beliefs.

4.31 Playing with the Boundaries of Avant-jazz

I'm hanging around in the Tribes Gallery, waiting for Matthew Shipp's performance to begin (discussed in Chapter 3). After a few minutes during which I idle around near the front row of seats, Steve Dalachinsky and I start chatting – a bit of small talk about what's been happening since we last saw each other, some mention of recent performances he has witnessed. As he's talking he quickly shifts his attention to talk to a man sitting behind me. This is a white man, probably in his 50s, combed white hair, white mustache, piercing blues eyes that stay wide open. His gaze is direct and unflinching when talking to you, but not at all unfriendly. His name is David.

Western political thought has invoked tropes of “family” and “community,” Kennan's Ferguson's work is relevant here. He locates incommensurability at a fundamental level of human social life:

“...incommensurability is neither an insoluble problem nor an unfortunate situation to be overcome, but rather the continuing condition of engaged human (and even transhuman) existence, the condition in which we have already happily or unhappily led our lives even within our own families” (Ferguson 2012:6).

²³ As I discuss in previous chapters, jazz scholarship frequently attends to processes of genrefication and genre debate within jazz cultures. Gennari's history of jazz criticism provides an especially thorough examination of genre-making as ongoing social practice; for him, the history of continuous debate among differently-positioned actors within jazz worlds *makes* the genre, rather than muddying an otherwise (and hypothetically) clear, transparent vision of the genre (Gennari 2006).

“Here’s another listener you should talk to,” Dalachinsky says to me right after having pedaled one of his books on David. He often likes to point me to potential interviewees for my research. As is usually the case with Steve, our conversation is a porous entity in that people nearby can easily join in and drop out as they wish. Dalachinsky’s penetrating voice may be one factor that causes this, but it is also enabled by his manner of talking: he likes to make conversation with new people, to mix people he knows well and new acquaintances together in swirls of talk.

I explain to David that I’m doing research for a dissertation on jazz listenership, and that Dalachinsky and I are tuning in to a longer, ongoing conversation we’ve been having about listening. Since David has met me as “an ethnographer” I feel comfortable playing the role of the questioning researcher. I ask him some questions about his interest in jazz, avant-garde in particular. I find out David lives in San Diego and periodically travels to NYC to hear jazz, because, as he puts it, “the jazz scene in San Diego is dead.” David has been a jazz fan for most of his life; his entree into avant-garde jazz was John Coltrane. He liked the more “straight-ahead” Coltrane recordings he’d heard, and so he began to listen to the “late stuff” and liked it. He branched out to listen to other avant-garde recordings from there, checking out recordings led by musicians whom he enjoyed as sidemen.

David studied a bit of piano when younger, but nowadays does not play music. He mentions that he knows the blues form, so when he listens to musicians play that, he can “follow the variations.” I guess he’s implicitly contrasting this with the way he listens to other forms and styles. I ask what it is specifically about avant-garde jazz that he enjoys,

what does he feel he gets from the style that he may not get from other music. David pauses, his eyes drifting upward in thought. I comment that I realize it's a difficult question to begin to answer verbally.

"I like the dissonance...the energy...the feeling of surprise, unpredictability...I really like the dissonance of it."

"I really like Elton John," Shipp chimes in, throwing out a variation on the various iterations of "I really like" that David has just spoken. He punctuates his verbal jab with a loud guffaw.²⁴ David, Dalachinsky, and I all laugh.

Dalachinsky and Shipp continue the joke. Dalachinsky tells Shipp, "I really think 'Your Song' is one you should play...It's a little bit funny..." He sings the line in his gruff voice, which is significantly lower than Elton John's. But, as I've witnessed on other occasions, Steve can carry a tune quite well. He also makes an outward gesture with one hand, leans forward a bit, and punctuates the melodic accents he's singing with small movements of his head.

"You guys should do 'Bennie and the Jets'!!" I declare with excitement.

"Yeah, that's the one - that's the one I was thinkin' of too!" Shipp overlaps with me, a big smile on his face and another quick laugh, this time more of a giggle than a guffaw. David's face remains deadpan. Dryly, he suggests that Shipp's next album be a covers record of all Elton John songs. I say that Dalachinsky and Shipp should do a duet album of Elton John with Dalachinsky on vocals.

²⁴ Not coincidentally, Shipp is an avid fan and student of boxing. He has allowed his love for and opinions about the sport to appear in print numerous times, and regularly posts to his Facebook wall on the topic of boxing.

What was Shipp doing with his Elton John non-sequitur? Was it merely a playful jab of conversation – an absurdist bit of verbal sparring in the form of free association and a cheeky way for him to join the conversation David and I were having? Did Shipp intend to make fun of Elton John? Did he only interject about Elton John for the momentary *frisson* of iconoclasm in a prominent avant-jazz pianist admitting he likes a pop musician? Or was Shipp somehow obliquely commenting on what he overheard David describing to me? Was Shipp matching what he perceived to be pretentious claptrap coming from David with his own bit of nonsensical bull? Perhaps Shipp was skeptical of David’s talk about the “unpredictability” and “dissonance” that he admired in avant-garde jazz and the true butt of Shipp’s joke was not Elton John, but David himself. As he often does in person and in print, Shipp was playing the trickster, ambiguously tossing out bold claims and opinions that he may or may not sincerely espouse.

But considering how this moment of conversation continued only equivocates the motives behind Shipp’s utterance. The four of us continued the Elton John joke, taking the incongruity that Shipp first put on the verbal table and pushing it further. Steve’s momentary bit of singing seemed to poke fun at Elton John’s song, perhaps at Elton John’s whole musical-performative ethos. Steve mimicked a ballad singer in both vocal style and body language. He did not mimick Elton John in particular, but he made reference to a popular-cultural notion of an earnest, pathos-laden style of performance – vocal and physical – that circulates widely enough that Shipp, David, and I all got the joke. The offhanded manner in which Steve launched into one line of “Your Song” belied

his ability to successfully reproduce a pop-balladic style. I mention above that he sang in tune; he also used vibrato on the second syllable of “funny,” letting the “ee” phoneme linger. So while Steve caricatured the vocal style of soft rock ballads, he got the style right – at least for a few seconds. Steve’s apparent mockery of the Elton John song performed another discursive function in our conversation: it took Shipp’s goofy, but semantically ambiguous, mention of Elton John firmly in the direction of satire.

I decided to mention “Bennie and the Jets” for a few reasons. First, I wanted to keep up with the repartee, and, in naming another Elton John song, I wanted to show that I was getting the joke. I also brought up “Bennie” because I personally like the song, in particular the rocking piano part that figures so prominently in the song’s arrangement (John 1973). John pounds out left-hand bass lines in the middle-lower register while playing riffs in octaves and stabbing chords with his right hand – the feel is heavy, rocking, and very idiomatic to the piano. I take Shipp’s excitement at my mentioning “Bennie” as a sign that he too heard the piano part in his mind. “*That’s the one I was thinkin’ of too!*” Thinking of when? Perhaps Shipp’s meant: “That’s the one I was thinkin’ of too [when I said ‘I really like Elton John’]!”

Was Shipp’s excitement prompted by the pleasure of our momentary confluence of thoughts, the way you might feel satisfaction when someone else finally bursts out with the name of the actor/novel/film you’ve been trying to remember? In addition, did he find it enjoyably incongruous to imagine himself pounding out “Bennie and the Jets”? Did he find the incongruity, the cognitive dissonance of the image, as enjoyable as I did? Or was Shipp’s laughter and pleasure at the mention of “Bennie” like that of an audience

when it witnesses a comedian successfully defy a taboo and hence release a collective tension around an illicit topic? That is, was Shipp's a guilty pleasure; did he laugh because for him we had just shared the secret of liking the song?

David's suggestion that Shipp record Elton John songs made explicit the incongruous image of Shipp playing Elton John, which I had imagined (and which I believe Shipp imagined). David and I pushed the joking to a sort of limit. Collectively, the four of us have reduced and caricatured the persona of Elton John. We have constructed him as a monolithic Other, an iconic representation of sonic and performative styles that we do not value *as much as avant-jazz*. In distancing Elton John from ourselves, our banter opens up room for ourselves (Meintjes 2003: 152, ff.). Shipp and Dalachinsky most actively pushed this moment of reductive humor by respectively naming Elton John as an Other and performing a parody of (an aspect of) his musical style. This is fitting because Shipp and Dalachinsky are most deeply and directly invested in staking out cultural territory for themselves as jazz avant-gardists. For decades, they have contributed sound and words to this Lower East Side avant-garde. Treating the figure of Elton John with an ambiguous ridicule helps Shipp and Dalachinsky, and by both involvement and implication David and myself, affirm who we are; this humorous discourse affords us a feeling of mutuality about what we implicitly value in expressive culture, even if this mutuality itself remains amorphous, defined only through negation.

This was an unplanned moment of performance that preceded the one planned for the afternoon. I mean "performance" in the sense that all social talk constitutes some kind of performance by the participants (Goffman 1959). The visible and audible

performances were a couple of sardonic barbs, a snippet of song, and a few bodily gestures. Underlying and forming the foundation for these perceptible social moves was the more crucial performance – at least more crucial for Dalachinsky and Shipp. As I mention above, this Elton John routine helped the four of us loosely affirm our aesthetic allegiance. The catalyzing moves of Matt and Steve were in part a result of their personalities – Matt’s shuttling between verbal iconoclasm and a general shyness, Steve’s gregarious nature and propensity for clowning. But their personal social styles combined with their shared investment in the aesthetics and ideology they share, and this shared investment inflected the performative moves, helped give them their specific contour and content. The superstructural performance was one of humor and play; the base-level performance was one of valuation and allegiance.

§

David and I resume our talk about the jazz avant-garde. David mentions listening to the Coltrane album that Cecil Taylor plays on.

Dalachinsky chimes in, “Oh, yeah, Cecil hates that record. Matthew [*to me*], remind me I’ve gotta show you at the house—I’ve got the original issue of that album which was under Cecil’s name. The title was *Hard-driving Jazz*.”

“*Coltrane Time*,” I say (see Coltrane 1960). It is both an answer and a question.

“Right, and when Cecil said he hated it they released it later under Coltrane’s name as *Coltrane Time*.”

David and Dalachinsky say they both enjoy the album. Steve mentions that Kenny Dorham, who played trumpet on the record, also disliked the results of the date.

This reminds me: “Oh, Steve, I listened to *Looking Ahead*. It’s good.” I’m referring to a Cecil Taylor-led album that we discussed during to a recent visit Steve and Yuko made to my apartment (see the Introduction).

“Oh, *Looking Ahead*, it’s great. It’s my favorite Cecil record of all.”

“—yeah, mine too.” This from Shipp, ever the careful listener. I quickly turn to look at him with surprise.

“Really?” My eyebrows must be raised a bit.

“Yeah,” he says quietly with a calm nod of his head, almost as if he is admitting a little-known secret, as though contained within his utterance is the hidden message that only the real experts know that this early album actually marks an artistic pinnacle in Taylor’s discography. Or maybe he’s back at it with his trickstering, and intends his reserved affect to create contrast dramatically with his opinion, further throwing its boldness into relief.

§

The ambivalent humor regarding Elton John helped to create a loose sense of avant-jazz solidarity through exclusion. This subsequent moment of talk about Cecil Taylor, a pioneer of the jazz avant-garde and still an active performer at the time of our conversation, further opened up the discursive space of avant-jazz. Rather than point to some of Taylor’s more canonized recordings from the 1960s and later, when Taylor recorded exclusively with his working groups, we were discussing recording’s from Taylor’s early career. Dalachinsky expertly wielded a bit of “insider” knowledge when he mentioned that Taylor disliked the recording that was originally intended for release

under his own name. The point is not that Steve was showing off, but rather that his listening *habitus*, his knowledge of the “rules of the game,” encouraged him to bring up the bit of gossip. Similarly, David, Shipp, and I exercised our own listeners’ *habitus* in further discussing early Cecil Taylor recordings. We were working together on our notions of avant-garde jazz as genre and canon. We were *doing* genre.

When Dalachinsky and Shipp vocally agreed that *Looking Ahead* was in fact their favorite Taylor recording, they both marked themselves as *deep* insiders in the social world of LES avant-jazz and implicitly affirmed their years-long friendship and professional collaboration.²⁵ The music of *Looking Ahead* retains meter and a swing feel, both stylistic features that disappeared in Taylor’s “mature” music. An avant-jazz listener with less experience, or one who felt he had more to prove to peer listeners, might vociferously praise Taylor’s most “out” recordings. Steve and Matt, however, were performing their own “maturity” as listeners by praising an ostensibly “immature” Cecil Taylor recording. I have no reason to believe that they intended any dramatic effect when they agreed about the excellence of *Looking Ahead*. The moment occurred without foresight (though perhaps Steve and Matt had talked about their mutual fondness for the recording sometime in the past). It was another way in which listening practices among these jazz aficionados presented themselves “naturally,” as part of a set of dispositions, a *habitus*.

²⁵ Dalachinsky and Shipp have collaborated in audio and print media (see, e.g., Dalachinsky et al. 2008; Dalachinsky and Shipp 2005).

4.32 The Social Space of Facebook: Solidarities and Conflicts

Years after my “official” period of fieldwork in and around the LES avant-jazz scene, I keep in touch with a number of scene members on Facebook. Many of their wall posts are links to Youtube videos of musical performances. Some posts are commentaries about different music scenes, musical histories or genres, or opinions regarding aesthetic debates within overlapping jazz circles. Anthony Basich, for instance, posts links to music recordings in various genres. In addition to jazz, Anthony often links to rock recordings and performances on Youtube; David Bowie is a particular favorite of his. Ras Moshe, whose frequent wall posts make him a regular presence on my Facebook feed, often creates a kind of unofficial tribute to a particular jazz musician by posting a series of links to different recordings of that musician. It’s as though Ras uses his Facebook wall to assume the role of a DJ offering impromptu and unofficial radio programs or podcasts, each show featuring the work of different musicians. Ras chooses musicians from the entire continuum of jazz styles, from New Orleans musicians such as Louis Armstrong to avant-garde players such as Peter Brötzmann. Ras also links to reggae and dub recordings. In similar fashion, James Keepnews performs his musical eclecticism by prodigiously posting links to many musical genres and subgenres that define themselves in opposition to a partly-imagined popular mainstream (e.g., free jazz, ambient, 20th-century classical, European free improvisation, underground rock). Keepnews also makes a habit of linking to recordings or performances by musicians who have just died, as a way of showing appreciation for the musical contributions of the deceased. James usually

punctuates his commentary on the provided link with the phrase, “Goodbye, Mr./Mrs. [deceased musician] and thanks for everything.”

In November of 2013, I observed the eruption of a vitriolic argument on a scene member’s Facebook thread. A prominent LES-scene musician, who has a penchant for making provocative remarks, posted a link to a photographic portrait of Wynton Marsalis. The musician, whom I will refer to as “OP” (original post), commented that he planned to dress up as Marsalis for Halloween, calling him a “scary monster.” This sparked a spirited thread of comments from a number of his Facebook friends. The majority of the comments either continued OP’s joke by ridiculing Marsalis in various ways, or criticized Wynton Marsalis’ undue fame and hegemonic status within the art world of jazz. One commenter took a dissenting view and referred to the critical and ridiculing comments as a form of bullying and “hating.” OP disagreed in an assertive but diplomatic manner. The tone of thread changed abruptly when two LES scene participants (whom I will call commenters “Alpha” and “Beta”) got into their own debate about Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) and the different aesthetics within various New York jazz worlds. Alpha, a musician active in the LES scene and frequent bandmate of OP, lambasted Marsalis and his associate, the writer and critic Stanley Crouch, saying that the two had “killed jazz, stuffed it, and mounted in a custom glass case outside Wynton’s luxury office in the penthouse of J@LC. They did that so they could have power over it and define it.” Alpha continued: “But like all other things with an undefinable character,

jazz (I call it free music so I don't have to have my ideas associated with those guys) just carries on without the corpse. They can have it. It's empty."²⁶

Commenter Beta, an avid jazz listener who also participates in the LES jazz scene in a professional capacity, took issue with Alpha's statement as follows: "what the hell are you talking about? they are just two people.. am not a fan of them but they didn't kill anything.. jazz is alive and well.." Following this, commentators A and took over the comments thread of OP's post with a heated exchange. Alpha chided Beta for thinking "jazz" had not suffered because of the hegemonic status of Marsalis and JALC. Beta, in turn, criticized Alpha for remaining willfully unaware of any jazz happening outside the "downtown/avant/free scene" (Beta's term) and declared that this ignorance made Alpha's proclamations about the death of jazz groundless. The exchange became increasingly vicious as Alpha and Beta veered from arguing about jazz's cultural politics into personal attacks against each other. However, the existing politics of the New York jazz world formed the conditions of possibility for this tense and awkward altercation, specifically the question of whether JALC poses a threat to all other jazz styles and/or scenes, in particular avant-jazz. One comment by Beta is worthy of recounting here: "...i never see you at any shows outside your specific aesthetic so how can i expect you to know what's really going on. i like your music and I like [name removed]'s music and when i was a young stupid kid I actually believed what you guys were saying. now that I

²⁶ With the exception of places where I remove information that would identify a person, quotations from this Facebook post are presented verbatim, including all idiosyncrasies of grammar and spelling.

am not a kid anymore and have had experiences and formed my own ideas I have no hate for lincoln center or anyone else.”

Several hours after I’d watched this argument play out, Alpha’s and Beta’s comments had disappeared from OP’s post. Whether OP deemed the exchange too unsightly and awkward and removed them himself, or whether Alpha and Beta both decided to clean up the mess they’d left on Facebook, the conflict exposed several of the tensions that periodically arise among scene participants. In Chapter 2, I characterize Wynton Marsalis’ discursive role within the scene as that of a straw man: a reliable figure of disdain against which the LES avant-jazz scene can define itself. The Facebook incident I recount here exposed the limits of this figuration of Marsalis and JALC. While commenter Beta agreed that Marsalis’ enjoyed an unfair share of fame and wealth, he seemed to be announcing the end of his tolerance for the inflammatory rhetoric that OP and Alpha were perpetuating. The casual register of communication that characterizes Facebook posts, as well as the buffering effect of the Internet (as opposed to face-to-face confrontation), catalyzed the breakdown of communication between Alpha and Beta. Through the medium of Facebook, OP, Alpha, and Beta employed a bellicose register of communication in a way that they may not have done in person. All three men may have expressed the same basic opinions in person, but I believe they would have reined in some of the bluntness and rancor they let rip on Facebook.

4.4 Conclusion: When the *Habitus* Gets You Down

As I allude to above, sometimes obsessed and addicted listeners get overwhelmed. On several occasions, scene participants and I shared our feelings of exhaustion. In early 2010, the ongoing conversation about listening and jazz Brad Farberman and I had been holding somehow moved to the topic of other music genres. In particular we talked about soul music of the 1960s and 1970s. We got together to listen to soul. The truth gradually crept out: we both wanted a change of pace from avant-jazz. Brad wanted it because of his constant exposure to it as Patricia Nicholson Parker's assistant. I wanted it because on one hand, I was attending so many live performances of avant-jazz that it began to feel like the aural equivalent of overeating, while on the other hand, I suffered a constant guilt that I wasn't listening to avant-jazz *enough* and therefore wasn't doing my ethnography the right way. We didn't talk about our soul-music listening sessions and conversations, and so they began to feel like our guilty secret.

I also confessed my feelings of exhaustion and possible burnout to Yuko Otomo and Steve Dalachinsky, two of my closest interlocutors and both LES-scene listeners who I expected would understand me without passing judgment or being offended. This conversation occurred after the one I recount above, wherein Steve ruefully longed to recapture the listener he *used* to be. Yuko immediately responded with a slow, maternal nod and told me that I was right to be wary of "overdosing" (my words) on the scene. Absolutely, I had to strike a balance for myself. She began to smile as she gestured towards Steve, and we all knew she was about to say that *he* represented a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of getting too involved as a listener.

On another occasion, Barbara Burch and I spoke about the fervor of many listeners on the scene. As we both knew him well, it was not surprising that Dalachinsky came up as an example of this fervor.

I was curious to hear her interpretation: “What do you think it’s all about, his going to like three gigs a night? It like he’s just—he’s trying to keep up with it all, and he’s barely even—”

“It’s a New York thing.”

“It’s a New York thing?”

“It’s a New York thing, I think.”

“Like, in terms of New York *music*?” I wasn’t sure I knew what the “thing” was.

“No, I think it’s a New York thing to have that, like we have—”

“—that you have to cover a lot of ground?”

“Yeah, we have that.” A native of Colorado who thought of New York City as her home, Barbara speculated that the city had something to do with the sense of urgency that flowed among listeners in the avant-jazz scene, the shared urge to keep up with it all. With the pride that often accompanies self-deprecation, she invoked a stereotype of New Yorkers as frenetic and hurried and included herself as exemplary of the stereotype. She believed that, for instance, San Francisco and Atlanta also had great jazz scenes, but she wasn’t sure if listeners in those scenes experienced the same feelings of density and compression that come with life in New York. Therefore, she doubted that those scenes created and experienced these tropes of obligation and addiction.

Reaffirming the LES scene's devotion to place, she concluded that there was a fundamental "New York-ness" about the scene's *habitus* of listening: "I mean, people who *aren't* into this music have that too...I don't think that's the scene . . I dunno . . I don't think there's a scene like this anywhere else."

Chapter 5

What We Talk About When We Talk About Listening: Negotiating Sociality in Moments of Listening

5.1 Introduction

Quick—think of a favorite recording of music, regardless of genre. Have you known the recording for a relatively long time, that is, do you have a history with it? Have you listened to it fifty, a hundred, times, or more? Do you associate the recording with an event in your past that you consider important (whatever “important” might mean to you)? Have you shared your enthusiasm about the recording with other people, either by speaking about it or listening to it with them? My guess is that anyone reading this would answer “yes” to at least one of these questions, and probably to several.

In this final chapter, I complete the inward movement, along several planes of experience, that has formed much of the trajectory of this study: from larger geographic areas to smaller indoor spaces, from the public spaces of performances to the domestic spaces of listeners’ homes, and from socially-circulated memories of the histories of neighborhoods to personal memories of past hearings. In Chapter 4, I offered an exposition of the habitus of listening within the LES scene by discussing my specific moments that exemplified ongoing practices of scene members. Here, I zoom in once again to consider particular instances of listening in which the diachronic spans of various practices coalesce in synchronic moments. In relation to Ch. 4, this chapter also

constitutes a shift from the imperfect (ongoing, habitual) to the perfect (discrete, completed).

While the moments of listening I consider here occurred in particular situations of time and space, these auditory moments also point back to intersubjective histories of listening. I am concerned with mapping out the relations between the details of these moments of audition and the lifeworlds that gave them experiential contour, texture, and definition.¹ Both my interlocutors and I call upon long histories of the various kinds of culture-producing work, in particular aspects of the habitus of listening that I describe in Chapter 4: countless hours spent listening to music; practicing instruments, and playing music with others; reading music journalism and scholarship; building and maintaining a collection of recordings; talking to other listeners, comparing listening experiences, engaging in debates about musical taste. These shared moments of aural experience are “thick” with the practices and dispositions that comprise our various iterations of a jazz-listener habitus.

Returning to the idea of “curating a collection of listening experiences,” which metaphor I proposed in Ch. 4, I see the moments of listening considered in this chapter as instances in which my interlocutors retrieved items from their collections of aural experience. But this observation only describes part of the intersubjective processes at work during these moments. These were not merely events in which scene members

¹ I draw my understanding of the concept of “lifeworld” from Michael Jackson, who writes, “The focus is on what phenomenologists call the lifeworld—that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend” (Jackson 1996:7), as well as from Alfred Schütz (1970).

retrieved their aural experiences and I played the role of passive witness; such a conception would imply a static quality not to my encounters in the field, but to all the social practices that mobilize aural experiences within any music scene. Especially in those instances when an interviewee and I found a register and style of communication that was mutually acceptable to us, once scene participants retrieved their listening experiences, we dialogically worked upon them: some of my questions or remarks spurred on my interviewees to further modulate and inflect their conceptions of listening practices and experiences; I retrieved some items from my own collection of listening experiences and similarly reconsidered and adjusted them. The ways we used our respective aural-memory collections does not quite correspond to the model of an art museum of objects that, once curated, can be viewed but not touched (a model that Susan Stewart's theorization of collections and souvenirs strongly suggests). In our listening sessions and conversations, LES scene members and I treated our aural-memory collections more like science museums full of interactive exhibits: we brought out our listening experiences to try them out, to see what they sounded and felt like. The analogy with an interactive science museum also brings up the limits inherent in sharing one's listening experiences: try out the exhibits and see how they work, but if you get out of control and break something, you've got a problem. My interlocutors and I both had reputations to build, manage, and protect. Part of the work involved in accessing another subject's aural experience is finding a balance between critical inquiry and respectful recognition of the feelings and symbolic value one's interlocutor has invested in memories and explanations of listening.

To foreground the delicacies inherent in ethnographically studying the aural experience of another subject, I first consider a “failed” listening session in which a scene participant and I listened to music together but seemed to have very little to say to each other about what we were hearing. I then turn to two scene members with whom I developed solid social rapport and was able to successfully negotiate the balance between interrogative and affirmative modes of conversation, leading to prolonged and detailed conversations about our aural experiences. I conclude the chapter with a brief consideration of a prominent avant-jazz musician who wished his aural experiences to remain unanalyzed, thus revealing an apparent incommensurability between LES avant-jazz and the interpretive methods of ethnography.

5.11 Aural Experience and Music Analysis: The Challenge of Avant-garde Jazz

Some of my explorations of these shared moments of listening lead to extended forays into music analyses guided by my ethnographic subjects. These do not purport to be explications of how my interlocutors hear music; rather, these analyses are the result of two phases of intellectual and affective work. In the first phase, interviewees and I hashed it out, talking about their (and often my) listening processes, listening to a recording together, talking through what we heard, listening again, and so on. In the second phase, I further hashed it out on my own, in the typical process of the ethnographer: I listened back to my recordings of these interviews, wrote down thoughts about them, listened to the music recordings on their own, thought some more, listened to the interview once

again, etc.² In so doing, I partake in a growing literature in music studies that performs “music analysis” via a foregrounding of the intersubjective processes by which listeners (including musicians) come to *hear* music in particular ways, to understand music as conveying webs of meaning, and to experience affect (e.g., emotional and kinesthetic intensities) during and as a result of aural perception.³ The music analysis I present in this chapter is collaborative in the sense that all knowledge produced through ethnography is so (Feld 1982; Rabinow 1977).

Extant analyses of avant-garde jazz form a small body of scholarship. Many of these studies perform versions of formal and structural analysis, seeking answers to questions such as: How do avant-garde jazz musician organize pitch content (Baker 1973; Block 1990; Block 1993; Block 1997; Charry 1997)? What are the principles underlying their choices in rhythm? How do they approach ensemble interaction and negotiate one another’s roles in an ensemble texture (Borgo 2005; Charry 1997)? What is the nature of the relationship among musical parameters such as “melody,” “rhythm,” “harmony,” and “timbre” – does a given musician’s style indicate a hierarchy among them (Jost 1975;

² I am inspired to highlight the repetitions inherent in these processes by Tom Porcello (1998).

³ Jazz ethnographers have addressed the social processes that construct aural experience through various analytical frames: investigating the dynamics of ensemble interplay and the affective dimensions of achieving groove (Berliner 1994; Jackson 2012; Monson 1996); as well as considering jazz’s “historicity” – the genre’s reflexive preoccupation with its past (Solis 2008). Ethnomusicologists have explored the recording studio as a site for understanding culturally-situated practices of listening and musical interpretation (Meintjes 2003; Porcello 1998), provided studies of how genre structures listening and affect (Fox 2004; Gray 2013) and considered how the circulation of sound recordings has spurred on the emergence of both new musical styles and new listening practices (Novak 2013; Schloss 2004). Steven Feld’s (2012b) work on Ghanaian jazz musicians stakes out a middle ground among the approaches to aural experience I’ve just listed: he fuses previous jazz ethnographers’ consideration of music-making practices and the discourses of historicity that help shape the genre to an exposition of revisionist and/or non-orthodox listening practices that emerge as a result of the transnational circulation within the African diaspora of jazz recordings and discourses.

Medwin 2008)? Some scholarship has considered several of these questions in tandem.⁴

The persistence of studies that aim to explicate some formal property of avant-garde jazz and free improvisation strikes me as symptomatic of an ongoing anxiety about the ostensible aesthetic conundrums posed by avant-garde jazz and other styles of highly flexible improvisation that eschew pre-determined structures or relationships within an ensemble. These scholars seem preoccupied with legitimating the genre by demonstrating the presence of organizing principles and musical logic in avant-garde jazz. Even as they propose analytical models informed by Western music theory, they rehearse the caveat that these theories and representational systems remain inadequate tools when it comes to avant-garde jazz.

I am not concerned with legitimating the logic of avant-jazz or persuading the reader that form is present in performances. I take it as axiomatic that avant-garde jazz

⁴ Ekkehard Jost's *Free Jazz* (1975) is both an early monograph on the jazz avant-garde and one of the first attempts to perform a rigorous analysis of the musical style of several key figures in the movement. David Such (1993) aims to document and explain what he calls the "worldview" shared by avant-garde jazz musicians. He offers an analysis of ensemble interaction within an "out jazz" performance that incorporates insights from conversation he had with one of the musicians involved. Eric Charry (1997) provides formal analysis of recordings by the Ornette Coleman Quartet, paying special attention to the role of bassist Charlie Haden. Since the bass in Coleman's first quartet typically described both harmonic areas and tempo (i.e., maintaining the bassist's role from the post-bop mainstream), Charry finds that the increasing flexibility Haden demonstrated with regard to the form of Coleman's tunes was pivotal in creating the musical "freeness" of the free jazz Coleman's group pioneered. David Borgo (2005) argues that the organizing principles of free improvisation can be productively understood through the lenses of recent scientific inquiry into various forms of complexity found in the natural world. Borgo treats theories on the nonlinear and self-organizing processes found at many levels of nonhuman and human life as both analogies that aptly describe the kinds of things that happen when avant-garde musicians improvise together and as technologies for performing non-traditional types of music analysis (e.g., he employs computer analysis to produce diagrams that quantify the level of acoustic complexity in a given recording of free improvisation). Ronald Radano's (1993) study of Anthony Braxton is a notable exception, as he concentrates less on developing a rubric for explicating form and more on an interpretive analysis of the rich intertextuality of Braxton's music, which, he argues, has been the medium through which Braxton has advanced an ongoing critique of false binaries such as "high" and "low" art, "black" and "white" music, etc.

musicians develop methods for improvising in highly flexible, unstructured musical settings. Rather, my primary goal throughout the present study has been to locate intensities of aural experiences of music in the social realm. In exploring how specific, socially-situated listeners hear avant-jazz, I am interested in finding a critical method of inhabiting the space in between the sounds musicians create and the ears of listeners who experience those sounds. Put another way, I aim to emphasize that any community instantiated through shared listening is always listening *to something* (in this case, jazz performances and recordings).

To be fair, I'm not the first to focus a study of listening practices upon avant-garde jazz. David Borgo (2005), Scott Currie (2009), Steven Feld (2012a), and Marc Medwin (2008) all acknowledge listeners as agentive actors within music scenes. Currie and particularly Borgo purport to discuss how listeners hear free jazz. But upon closer examination listeners are oddly anonymous or generalized in their work.⁵ Marc Medwin reflexively positions himself as the listener under consideration in his analysis of John Coltrane's "late period" (1965-1967).⁶

⁵ Currie mentions the importance of "listeners" in the communitarian dynamics of the Vision Festival, but does not include discussion of any specific listeners during his analyses of avant-jazz performances (263-341). In a chapter resulting from collaborative research with computer scientist Joseph Goguen, Borgo writes, "we argue that musical meanings are best located in the act of listening rather than at the structural level of notation or even sound" and then reveals that he and Goguen constructed "models of musical experts (either performers or listeners)" in creating their phenomenologically-guided analysis of the music of Sam Rivers. I mean to problematize the disjuncture between Borgo's reminders (throughout the book) that the study of musical meaning hinges upon socially-situated processes of listening and his resorting to an anonymous, composite "model listener" whose particular predilections and aural aptitudes he obscures from the reader.

⁶ I am interested in Medwin's work because he sets out to build a theoretical framework *according to the* subject of study. While Medwin applies much of the standard vocabulary of music theory and incorporates significant elements of existing music-analytical models, he attempts to synthesize these into a method that directly accounts for the particular idiosyncrasies of the music he studies. I further interact with Medwin's

5.2 “Listening to Everything All at Once”: The Stakes of Connoisseurship

John Rogers and I sit in his apartment in Fort Greene Brooklyn on a Saturday in early April, 2009. It is mid-afternoon and cloudy. The apartment’s windows are large and let in enough natural light that no lamps are necessary. The place is lightly furnished; things lie here and there on the hardwood floor – a few articles of clothing, a book, John’s bicycle. We sit on folding chairs next to a stereo system that includes a turntable, upon which John has placed a record with music lead by jazz clarinetist Barney Bigard.

I have interviewed Rogers once before, getting some basic biographical information and some stories about his introduction to jazz and his decision to work as a photographer of jazz musicians. Today is to be a listening session in which John acts as a private DJ, playing music of his choice. My task is to elicit descriptive language from John, to get him to talk about what he hears in the music, why it moves him, recount his personal history with the musical selections.

The sounds of Barney Bigard and his band issue from the stereo speakers. We sit in silence. About two thirds of the way through the 78-era recording, Bigard takes the lead.

“Such a great sound on clarinet,” John remarks. I mutter agreement.

After the tune is over, John switches LPs and plays a new recording (Hawkins 1995). I ask if it’s the same band; John answers that it’s not. A saxophonist plays a very

thinking below, in the section in which I analyze my conversations and listening session with Patrick Brennan.

embellished version of the melody of “On the Sunny Side of the Street” with the bouncy articulation and fast vibrato typical of pre-WWII wind players.

“Is that alto or soprano?” The register in which the saxophonist plays confounds me, but I also want to try to give John an opening to start talking. I’m hoping that by communicating some uncertainty about my own aural experience I will ease tension he seems to feel in talking out loud about his listening.

“That’s uh...it’s Coleman Hawkins, I believe.” The leader of the recording is Hawkins, and John is working off the assumption that a leader would play the opening melody on his record.

“Oh.” I stare off into space, feeling confused. I’m unaware that Hawkins made any recordings playing alto or soprano saxophone, at least not as leader.

The alto player finishes his chorus and in comes the burly sound of Hawkins’ tenor. “*That’s* Coleman Hawkins, so that must have been alto,” Rogers says.

“Yeah, that might have been Tab Smith,” I say, consulting the discographical information on the LP sleeve. We continue listening in silence for about the next three minutes.

As the out chorus of the melody draws to a close, the ensemble stops and Tab Smith plays a cadenza. Within a couple seconds of hearing Smith’s entrance, John remarks, “This is really amazing here.” As the ensemble holds a final chord, he adds, “Pretty wild for 1944.”

“Yeah,” I reply in agreement. I am surprised by how laconic John is being. I wonder if we held different assumptions about how this listening session was going to

proceed. “Wait, so tell me a little bit more – when did you first hear that?” As soon as the words have left my mouth, the question sounds weak, contrived.

John tells a brief story about posting on an Internet message board, expressing his interest in obtaining the (presumably out-of-print) recording if another collector should find it. He eventually heard from a collector who had located a copy in Japan; John acquired the record.

“How did you know about it before that?” I probe him further.

“Uh, I think from Phil Schaap...he told me that I should check it out.”

Next John plays a recent acquisition, an Impulse! album lead by free-jazz trombonist Roswell Rudd (Rudd et al. 1966). John cues up a track. For several minutes, while the record plays, silence stubbornly sits between us. Then, speaking over the record, John uses clipped statements to describe a chain of personal connections: meeting Roswell Rudd on a subway and talking about Lester Young, later becoming friends with Rudd’s son and through him asking to have Roswell sign the record cover, realizing he needs Charlie Haden (the bassist on the recording) to sign the cover for him.

After about six minutes of auditing the album, John removes it from the turntable. “So what do you listen to when you listen to that track?” I ask a bit quickly.

“I dunno...I haven’t listened to it in a long time. I thought there was something better on there than there was.”

I chuckle. “I dunno, it sounded pretty good to me.”

“It sounded okay,” John mumbles in his bass voice. An awkward silence ensues.

“So how did Logan sound the last time you heard him?” I try to continue the dialogue by referring to Giuseppe Logan, who played on the Rudd recording and whose recent “comeback” performances came up in our previous conversation.

“Oh, he sounded a lot better than the first time I heard him.” He continues pulling out records and playing short excerpts. We listen to some of an Aretha Franklin recording. John then switches to a Bill Frisell album and plays the beginnings of a few tracks. He then puts on a new LP without mentioning what it is.

“What’s this?” I ask, as the sounds of a performer engaging in banter with an audience play on the stereo.

“George Lewis.”

A piano plays a tonal introduction in swing rhythm; bass and drums join in with a heavy *chunk-chunka-chunk-chunk* feel articulating the 4/4 meter; clarinet and trumpet weave contrapuntal melodies over the rhythm section – the sounds of New Orleans jazz.

“Oh, *this* George Lewis...I was thinking the trombone player, the AACM guy,” I say with what I hope sounds like self-deprecation.

“Oh, no. Different George Lewis.”

After a couple more minutes of listening, I ask, “So lemme ask you, if you had to tell someone *how* to listen to this, what would you say? ...Cuz I’m not saying I don’t think it’s good; I think it’s good, but just as a—“

“I don’t know, I wouldn’t tell anyone how to listen to anything.” I chuckle nervously at this reply. John taps his foot at a slow pace that seems to have nothing to do with music on the record.

I try another angle: “Is there anything in particular in the music that you focus on?”

“No, I just listen to *everything*, all at once.” A few seconds later the tune ends; over the applause on the recording John repeats, “...just listenin’ to everything at once.”

“Yeah...,” I answer hesitantly.

A few selections later, I again ask Rogers what he has begun to play. “Who is this now?”

“Uh, Lambchop, from their first record...on Merge” (Lambchop 1994). As the music continues, John pats his hand in an irregular rhythm, again seemingly unrelated to the pulse of the music.

We listen in silence until the end of the Lambchop track. I attempt to engage John in talk about listening on a broader level. “The stuff you’ve been playing me, how often do you listen to these? Can you remember?”

Pausing briefly while he thinks, John answers, “Oh yeah. I listened to this all through high school and I *still* listen to this a lot.” He plays another track on the CD.

“This is one of the best albums ever.”

“Are they still active?” I ask.

“Yeah, they’re still active. Yeah, they’re really famous now. Pretty funny...considering I would go to hear them play and the band would outnumber the audience.”

“Yeah, yeah...” my voice trails off. I continue hesitantly, “Now you’re seeing my ignorance about *many* genres of music.” I punctuate the statement with an awkward laugh.

“Oh yeah...well...you’re seeing that I’m *into* many genres of music. Not just whatever you thought I was into.”

A new musical selection on the turntable breaks the silence that had once again settled between us.

§

For the two-hour duration of this listening session, I felt social rapport between John and myself flicker but a few times, only to quickly vanish as if extinguished by the slightest breeze. Leaving his apartment, I felt disoriented and drained. It seemed like we had actually taken a step *backwards* in our acquaintanceship. Behind my puzzlement at his terse demeanor was a more gnawing anxiety that my approach to talking with him about listening had failed. I wondered if I should have come to the event of this listening session more prepared, or differently prepared, with a more definite notion of the kind of information I wanted to obtain from John.

This afternoon represents an extreme case from my fieldwork encounters. This was an instance where my interlocutor’s thoughts on his aural experiences and his general listening habitus seemed *particularly* opaque. I purposely place this case study at the front of a chapter that explicates moments of listening I shared with my interlocutors because it reveals some of the challenges faced by the ethnographer of listening practices. Though tropes about listening circulate prevalently throughout different jazz cultures, each individual listener and practitioner values his affect-laden narratives about aural experience. Sharing those narratives and the feelings to which they give form can be an intimate act, exposing the listener’s affective imaginary and hence placing him in a

vulnerable position. The opacity of Rogers' conversation during our listening session was also a reminder about the ethics of ethnography. In hindsight, I realized that I had gotten ahead of myself with John, and was asking for cultural and personal information he was probably not yet ready to divulge.⁷ During our session, the structuring forces of culture and social custom – in particular the “rule of the games” that help to form a jazz-listening habitus – came in waves, or moved in and out of focus, helping to mediate the intersubjective dynamics of our interaction.

My first scheduled interview with John Rogers occurred about a week and a half before the listening session described above. I met him at a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant where he worked delivering orders. It was on a block of Rivington St that looked like a remnant of the Lower East Side's past. In the midst of the increasingly gentrified neighborhood, here was a rundown-looking block with a mottled collage of storefronts, not smoothed-over display windows. We sat in the tiny store on two stools as I interviewed him. I ate a tasty burrito – the signature fare of the joint – while we talked above my digital recorder.

John was 29 years old at the time of our interviews. He told me stories about his early adulthood, his introduction to jazz, work as a DJ at Fisk University's radio station in his native town of Nashville, his decision to move to New York City due to his increasing interest and involvement with jazz musicians. He spoke with candor about unhappy

⁷ A classic account of the ethical responsibilities that face the ethnomusicologist who wishes to gain access to cultural knowledge is the Introduction to Paul Berliner's *The Soul of Mbira*. Berliner humorously recounts his repeated attempts to find out the names of the keys on the mbira dzavadzimu from his Shona interlocutors. He finally learned the keys' names after several years of contact with his research participants, when they felt assured that he would respect their tradition and use the knowledge in an ethical manner.

times at a boarding school during his high-school years, his dropping out, and an ensuing “beatnik” period (John’s words) that involved heavy drinking. Upon discovering Columbia University’s WKCR⁸ over the Internet, John felt a sense of belonging: “you know, when I first heard KCR I was like, Wow! I’m not alone [laughs]...in the world anymore; there’s people like me! [laughs]”

During this meeting, John was more talkative than I expected from my first encounter with him. Steve Dalachinsky had introduced me to him several weeks before at a performance at Roulette; he spoke mainly in monosyllables during that brief meeting. In the burrito place, John continued to seem shy, often looking towards the ground while talking to me in his deep, slow voice. But when I asked him questions, his answers were always generous, and sometimes even verbose.

While there were slight indications of potential social awkwardness from our first conversation, I deemed it successful enough to merit follow-up contact. At the end of our meeting in the Mexican restaurant, I proposed the idea of doing a listening session together. John appeared interested and agreed to it. I was caught off-guard by his clipped utterances and seeming standoffishness during our second meeting.

You’re seeing that I’m into many genres of music. Not just whatever you thought I was into. Was this meant to convey pride in his epicurean musical appetite? Was it a defensive verbal jab, a way to fight off what he felt were my attempts to pigeonhole him as a “jazz fan”? Just before this quip, John had played Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. I

⁸ [W]KCR is known among jazz aficionados living in the NYC area to heavily feature an eclectic array of jazz in its programming.

had told him that my wife dislikes bluegrass music and so I don't get to play it on the stereo at home. An exaggeration, but I intended this utterance to show him that I was sympathetic to musical eclecticism, that I was going along with him as he ventured outside the realms of jazz to demonstrate that he listens widely. I was trying to create rapport.

My account above makes obvious the tension I experienced during this listening session with John Rogers, for above I allude several times to my own discomfort and my perception of his possible defensiveness. But this interaction also hinged on negotiating the line between security and danger. Perhaps John feared that I meant to call his jazz connoisseurship into question. There was a related kind of social danger that lurked in the shadows of our interaction: the danger that our ostensibly amiable acquaintanceship, predicated upon a shared interest in music, could be undone by the experience of listening to music and talking about it. The danger here would be the possibility of the cultural milieu we ostensibly shared – jazz – actually *failing* us in our attempts to build rapport. The very ritual that was supposed to enable rapport – the homosocial male bonding of listening to records together – instead threatened to preemptively quash it.

When I claim that cultural and social custom *mediated* our interaction, I am thinking particularly about some of John's communicative strategies and particularly his deployment of prominent tropes of aural expertise that circulate among jazz listeners. In this discussion I am informed by scholarship that places affective intensities on the same phenomenal and epistemological planes as social life and political histories, and sees affects and subjectivities as dialogically constructed (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Flatley

2008; Gray 2013; Mazzarella 2009). I experienced “negative” affective states, such as awkwardness, anxiety, and tension, during my listening session with John. For his part, John appeared variously defensive, annoyed, and perhaps bored.

When I tried to elicit specific comments from John about what he focuses his aural attention upon when listening, his reply deflected my question: *I listen to everything, all at once*. Rogers’ answer initially struck me as an evasive maneuver to save face in light of my questions about what he was hearing in the music. Did he avoid giving more information because I’d caught him off-guard? Had he not thought about musical sound in an analytic fashion (and here I mean “analysis” in the sense of breaking up the totality of musical sound into its constituent parts)? Another way to interpret John’s verbal sparring is to understand it as a way of rhetorically turning the tables on me, calling me out for asking narrow-minded questions. If listening to “everything all at once” means listening with deep appreciation and allowing oneself to become absorbed in the irreducibility of musical flow, then focusing on discrete parameters when listening to music is the opposite: it is listening to bits and pieces within the music, literally reductive.

The idea behind my interviewing Rogers, the premise for the interview, was that he had something to say about his aural perception. So when we got down to nuts and bolts questions of his listening - or when I oafishly trod all over the topic - a space of ambiguity opened up between us. John drew upon a trope of music connoisseurship: “listening to everything all at once” is a statement that marks the learning and erudition of the one who speaks it.

In using this phrase, John brought an element of jazz culture into a faltering interaction about jazz. Here was jazz culture back on track, doing what it should have been doing: mediating our interaction. Verbal memes such as this smooth over the bumpy surfaces caused by the affects that arise in face-to-face relations. John Rogers' talk about listening to the whole thing at the same time covered up the raw, exposed surfaces of hearing and feeling of the ambiguous social terrain into which I had heavy-handedly led us.

Above, I note that listeners may find cause to feel protective of their aural experiences. This was not always the case in my fieldwork. For example, Steve Holtje opened up to me more quickly than John Rogers did, providing loquacious and boldly opinionated expositions of what music he listens to, and why. But there are specific, socially-grounded reasons for this. Holtje is older than Rogers, and has worked for a long time as a music critic. Holtje had been listening to and participating in New York music scenes since at least the early 80s. He had far more practice in verbally communicating (and hence performing) his aural experience of music. John moved to New York City in 2003 and began work as a photographer in 2004. He may have felt somewhat insecure in his status as a true scene "member," especially in the context of being asked to give an account of his listening skills and connoisseurship.

During our first interview, John held all the cards. Though I prompted him with questions, the general aim and format of the meeting gave him a chance to construct a narrative about himself. He was able to position himself as an informed jazz listener. He supported this identity with specific utterances: he named musicians; he named

recordings; he cited his participation in a common jazz pilgrimage – the move to New York City.

In our second meeting he may have felt that his reputation as jazz aficionado was now on the line, though I did not intend our listening session to be a *test* of his musical acumen. John's mistaking altoist Tab Smith for tenor sax player Coleman Hawkins on a record John had owned for a number of years could have been the plausible error I mention above: Hawkins is credited as the leader on the recording, but Smith is the first saxophonist we hear when playing the record. Or it could have been a momentary lapse on John's part; I can recall times when, listening to jazz on the radio, I have failed to recognize a musician whose style I know well and whom I typically identify with confidence. Or John may have felt it was a moment that threw his musical expertise, and the acuity of his musical ears, into doubt. Consider how our interaction proceeded from this "micro-mishearing": John emphatically noted the actual entrance of Hawkins in the recording, as if to correct his mistake of a moment before.

As the out chorus of the melody draws to a close, the ensemble stops and Tab Smith, the altoist, plays a cadenza. Upon hearing the very first notes of Smith's entrance, John R remarks, "This is really amazing here." As the ensemble holds a final chord, John adds, "Pretty wild for 1944."

Pointing out the cadenza served to demonstrate John's familiarity with the recording, the implication being that he *knew* the cadenza is a brilliant one because he had listened to it numerous times. Calling the style of Smith's playing "wild for 1944" demonstrated not only an awareness of jazz history, but an awareness of how to *talk*

about jazz history with other jazz-heads. He knows that one of the things they listen for is innovation in style, improvisations that are daring, risky, and carried off with *élan*.

My questions about how John became acquainted with this recording allowed him to further recuperate his credentials as jazz aficionado after the possible embarrassment of his mishearing. He namedropped Phil Schaap, whose name carries symbolic weight to a New York-based jazz enthusiast. Schaap has hosted jazz-themed programs for Columbia University's radio station (WKCR) for over three decades; he has produced many CD reissues of historical jazz recordings and written exhaustive accompanying notes; LES scene participants, as well as many other jazz listeners I know in the New York area, informally refer to Schaap as a "walking encyclopedia of jazz history." By indicating personal acquaintance with Schaap, John proved that he possesses the cultural capital that qualifies him to inhabit New York jazz circles. Tracking down an obscure recording with the help of Internet message boards indexes the labor time John has invested in cultivating his listening skills and connoisseurship.

Here was an example of a listener making his listening visible and tangible. The challenges of communicating the feelings jazz music elicits, and possibly the lack of a standardized vocabulary for describing musical sound, sometimes encourage jazz aficionados to devise other ways to transform their auditory labor-time into a commodity that is tradable within the economy of listening and connoisseurship within the jazz microscene I studied. Displaying obscure recordings, citing discographical information, dropping the right names—this talk indexes repertoires of music-cultural knowledge and helps to make the invisible act of listening somehow more tangible.

“So lemme ask you, if you had to tell someone how to listen to this, what would you say? ...Cuz I’m not saying I don’t think it’s good; I think it’s good, but just as a—”

“I don’t know, I wouldn’t tell anyone how to listen to anything.”

Perhaps John misunderstood the meaning of my clumsily-articulated question. I was trying to get him to talk about which musical parameters are most striking to him. But his answer implies that while he wanted recognition as a jazz aficionado, he did not wish to play the role of a pedant. His answer also implies humility and a related belief that to instruct someone else in how to listen to music would be to deprive her of the pleasures of forming her own hearing.

At several moments when things got tense or awkward between us, we turned to the records. John would put a new one on the turntable. If I was at a loss for what to say or became flustered by the direction our had taken, I would pick up a record cover and scan over the track-listing or names of musicians. Records, vinyl LPs and 78s – the material objects themselves – were what brought us into his apartment; at times they became the cause of social tension; then at other times they were the safeguard that relieved that tension. The materiality of sound recordings, in addition to verbal cultural tropes of music connoisseurship, mediated our sociality; these material objects were something in which we both could find moments of safety when the dynamics of our interaction, when the structure of the *interview* as a performed speech genre, became ambiguous.

5.3 Getting Down to the Nitty-gritty: Talking Musical Form and Style

If talking to John Rogers about his listening practices felt like an uphill battle, during my conversations with Patrick Brennan I sometimes struggled to keep up with the powerful flow of his thoughts as he talked copiously about his life as a musician, his theories about listening, and his aural experiences. I conducted interviews with Brennan at later point in fieldwork and had grown more aware of how to “get at” listening than when I had talked with Rogers. I listened to and spoke about jazz recordings with Patrick only after we built up a history of socializing: I attended a few of his gigs, we shared hours of conversation (both with and without my recorder running), and we exchanged numerous emails. Here I preface an analysis of our listening session with background information on Patrick and excerpts of our previous interviews. By noting that my understanding of our listening session made much richer by our hours of talk, I intend my analysis and discussion of Patrick’s aural experience to demonstrate two of the broader themes of this dissertation: that processes of aural perception and interpretation are shaped by lived histories of intersubjective musical practices, and that the aural experiences of specifically-situated listeners can suggest productive approaches to music analysis.

§

I seem to remember seeing Patrick Brennan before we actually met. This alleged sighting took place on 11 Sept. 2009, at a club on Ave A and 5th St. called *Drom*. Steve Dalachinsky was doing a reading of Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Patrick and his partner, Randee, were sitting at the bar. They’d come to show support for Steve.

Two days later Patrick and I officially made each other's acquaintance, after the "In Gardens" performance I describe in detail in Ch. 1. Patrick slipped into a conversation Lisle and I were having after the quartet's set. I had been explaining myself – a grad student doing dissertation research – to Lisle, and Patrick was listening. Once I mentioned that my main focus in doing fieldwork was on how people in and around the LES scene listen to jazz, Patrick opened up. He started to talk fluently about the phenomenology of playing and hearing music, kinesis, the intellectual and emotional aspects of listening to music. He said that he thought about these things often. "Every musician is first and foremost a listener," he told me. Patrick's talk was effusive. Our quick jump into conversation was something that had happened – and would happen – a number of times with field informants, but with Patrick I sensed someone who wanted to have a long conversation about the kinds of questions that were driving my dissertation.

One night at the RUCMA series in the Local 269, Patrick led a set, accompanied by Lisle Ellis on bass, and Berne Nix on guitar. Steve Dalachinsky was at the 269 that night. After the set was finished, Steve admitted to Patrick that, as one friend to another, he didn't understand his music. He went on to mention his self-consciousness at not knowing how to read music notation, and not being trained in music theory. He said that he felt this closed off a whole level of creativity to him, left a whole aspect of the music out of his reach. Partially in response to this, Patrick said that notation is a jargon. He meant this not as a snub, but in the more value-neutral sense that music notation is a specialized language used as a tool or shorthand by members of a certain profession. Patrick and I chatted some about the organization of the trio music I just heard. He said that they were

going for “3-D counterpoint,” and that they try to be contrary to expectations, to play “*counter-counterpoint*.” I remember enjoying the pun and its suggestive quality.

Brennan’s two metaphors – “3-D counterpoint” and “counter-counterpoint” suggest a system of musical organization that interacts with the tradition of Western art music, but within that dialogic relation, moves *against* it. Before I left for the night he said that he was as interested to pick my brain as I was to pick his. He said that it seems people of my generation “don’t hear this music” and he was curious to know what I heard in it.

Over the course of our first recorded interview, I obtained some basic biographical facts about Brennan. He was born in 1954 and grew up in Dearborn, Michigan: a “white, fairly segregated suburb of Detroit,” in his words. He moved to New York City to pursue a career as a musician in 1975. He talked some about the avant-garde jazz scene in Detroit and noted that he considered his own music an extension of that scene and its style.

My conversations with Patrick focused on relating details of musical style to cultural values and social structure; sometimes I felt as though I was speaking with another ethnomusicologist. Our dialogue took place over a period when Patrick was writing an extended essay juxtaposing his theories on musical composition with a critique of culturally-based approaches to composition and improvisation. While I was working on an ethnographic dissertation about listening, he was writing a monograph based upon years of thinking about music and sociality. While our discursive registers and conceptual vocabularies were slightly different (his was that of an artist creating an aesthetic

manifesto, mine was that of an ethnographer developing an account of a music scene), there was considerable overlap to them.

Several times during our discussions of various musicians' styles, remembered performances and listenings, and other aural experiences, we paused on a specific example of sonic detail in order to work at putting our aural perceptions and memories into words. We were both very conscious of the act of translation implicit in talking about music. Our talk was a kind of meta-conversation, a conversation about talking about music.

One of these conversations began on the topic of Charles Gayle, a musician who has achieved canonical status and is revered as a master within the LES avant-jazz scene. Brennan expressed his admiration for Gayle. I was eager to hear a musician's take on Gayle and asked Patrick if he could tell about why Gayle was such a respected musician within the scene. Soon we had plunged into a wide-ranging discussion of jazz saxophony, the traditions and continuum of African American musical, and Patrick's experiences as a musician. Patrick kept returning to the question of Gayle's musicianship; Gayle became a theme that recurred in the long improvisation of our conversation. While Brennan was explicating his interpretation of Gayle as a musician firmly rooted in and extending core features of African American music, he delved further into thoughts about black music, eventually arriving at a story about Ornette Coleman. He described listening to a set in which Coleman played with his longtime associates, bassist Charlie Haden and drummer Billy Higgins:

“Ornette starts playin’ some shit, you know and . . . Billy’s strategy was to play this . . . indefinite kinda thing that grooved but didn’t really lock you in a certain direction, cause he didn’t know where Ornette was gonna go. But Charlie Haden! In this one instance Ornette starts playing something, Haden’s just like this [makes facial expression of frown/scowl] he’s listening, you know, not angry, but just kind of tense. Maybe a minute, maybe a minute and a half before he plays a note on the bass, because the man is so determined not to play any bullshit. And he’s trying to figure out what Ornette’s doing. It’s that commitment that makes—makes . . . that you don’t hear in a lot of so-called free jazz.

“You know, it’s this composition, this together thing and this division thing. And meanwhile, [speaking quickly] the other part of the thing—Ornette is like . . . it’s like, there’s a thing that Charlie Parker does that Ornette . . . has really developed, although other cats have done it too, Miles developed it a different way, Coltrane when he was with Miles, more than later, developed it too. But it’s this . . . combination of entrance and exit inside the overall flow of the music. And . . . I could hear Ornette, he would like . . . I don’t even know how you do this, but he would make a statement on the instrument and . . . it would—I could hear it, it would have all these meanings. It would mean: ‘Play like this,’ you would accompany it like that, you know, so he would throw this into the group, right? And then his next phrase would give you a *completely* different *message*!! A whole other set of feelings that he was referring to, a whole set of— a way with the time, or the harmony, or the melody. And he would constantly be doing these things, like always

throwing the cats curves. You know, just when you think, ‘I can settle into this’ he’s giving you another story, I mean—“

“—So like what are the parameters through . . through which he defines those different, like . .” I interrupted Patrick in order to make sure I was following him, particularly his admiration of Coleman’s “entrance and exit inside the overall flow of the music.”

I also have to interrupt myself here, in the middle of this excerpt from our dialogue, to draw the reader’s attention to some things. First, there is the intimate detail with which Brennan recounts the interpersonal dynamics of performance. Brennan’s narration focuses on very specific people making music, musicians whom he has studied, heard, and seen for years. Second, this excerpt provides an extended example of the process, the act, of talking about music. Here was a skilled listener thinking out loud in real time about sonic details that he has stored in his memory. I listened to Patrick tell this story with a feeling of suspense; I was waiting to hear the revelatory detail/s that were making his narration so animated and impassioned.

In his recollection of the performance, Patrick highlighted the ways that an improviser can change rhythmic feels and styles from one phrase to the next. His comment about Billy Higgins’ choice to play “indefinite kinda thing that grooved but didn’t really lock you in a certain direction” was an observation about how the drummer decided to play a drum pattern that *implied* more than one metric scheme or tempo. I now wanted to be sure I stayed with him and maybe push him into even greater specificity about sonic detail and musical structure.

PB: It's really hard for me to say exactly what it is, but I can tell you an outline, because I don't have the specific, maybe if I had the specific music and I was . . . I was, um, transcribing it I'm not sure I could nail it. But, part of it—

MS: —I mean just for instance. [PB: okay, so let's say he] Make up your own example of it.

PB: Let's say he plays a blues phrase . that implies . . a kind of middle-tempo, uh . . hard-driving kind of feel . and it goes harmonically kind of like . right into the center of that [groove]. His next phrase comes off on some completely other harmonic thing, implies something more like a calypso aaand—I'm just makin' shit up [MS: yeah yeah, but now I understand] You know, or it's some mutation of those—you know, he's thinking in terms of all these different motion patterns. And the motion patterns are really complex messages, because if you're playing a motion music, like a drummer especially, you want to complement that, you wanna play something that strengthens that. That's your first thing. Distinguishing yourself is always secondary, even though that's something that inevitably comes out...

Every time I've heard Ornette with . his old-school cats have been some of the best, most intense listening experiences I've ever had...

Patrick begins his answer ready to say that transcribing a specific sound recording by Coleman might help him pinpoint the layers of detail he hears in the music, but then changes his mind in mid-sentence. “[If] I was transcribing it I’m not sure I could nail it.” He then describes changes in rhythmic feel, which are difficult to capture in Western music notation. The “swing” feel alone has attracted the attention of writers for decades, and explanations of it have produced a voluminous literature.⁹ In terms of rhythmic organization, swing is a matter of how musicians accent certain beats in rhythmic meter; it is not necessarily a matter of note durations or harmonic rhythm. This is partly why Brennan realizes he would have a difficult time transcribing the kinds of “messages” he heard Ornette Coleman communicating. If Coleman were to play one phrase of eighth notes in a medium-tempo swing feel and follow it with a phrase of eighth notes in a

⁹ See Butterfield (2010) for a useful overview of definitions of “swing” rhythm.

calypso feel, a transcription would show two melodic phrases made up of eighth notes. A typical convention in jazz transcription would be to label the first phrase “swing feel” and the second “calypso” or perhaps “straight-8th feel,” meaning that the downbeat and upbeat eighth notes would be of equal duration and accent. Hence a transcription itself would require contextual knowledge from the reader; only a reader already familiar with how swing and calypso sound would benefit from the labels.

Brennan implicitly defines himself as a composer who plays. He aligns himself with a compositional tradition in jazz. Over the course of our conversations, this definition and alignment emerged. He traced this tradition over the course of our conversations. It emerged in bits and pieces of talk, but the larger thread became clear when I listened back to my recordings: Ellington to Monk to Ornette Coleman to Cecil Taylor to various AACM musicians, including Henry Threadgill, whom he named as a particularly inspiring current-day jazz figure. He identifies an artistic heritage and finds a present-day musical home in it. He positions this tradition in contradistinction to experimental jazz musicians who favor “energy playing.” It is perhaps serendipitous that I did not converse with Patrick until well into my fieldwork; this meant that his distinctions were legible and made sense to me. Patrick’s mildly oppositional stance towards “energy playing” highlights the aesthetic and ideological differences that operate even within the relatively small milieu of the LES avant-jazz scene.

During one of our interviews, Patrick referred to the Vision Festival as “lets face it, the only game in town.” This was in the context of his talking about gigging opportunities he had. Brennan had only played the Vision Fest once, and that was by virtue of a

mistake, according to him. Like many other scene participants and actors within the jazz world, when Patrick said “Vision Fest” he used the title metonymically. “Vision Fest” refers to the week-long festival, perhaps the most visible event organized and produced by AFA and Patricia Parker. He means AFA’s institutional role within the LES scene: the discourse used by AFA official announcements and literature, and also by many of the musicians who feature in AFA events – a discourse with strong doses of spiritualism and ‘60s-style non-conformism, in which “community” functions as a keyword to conjure associations with grassroots activism and solidarity. He also means AFA’s privileging of a shifting yet recognizable collection of musicians, including William Parker (not coincidentally organizer Patricia’s husband), Sabir Mateen, Roy Campbell, Rob Brown, Cooper-Moore, Matthew Shipp.¹⁰

Patrick was indirectly positioning his musical aesthetic against what he saw as a hegemony of style that prevailed at the Vision Festival. Attending a number of sets confirmed this – he played tunes, his band members read off of charts, however musically eccentric they might be. In conversation he was sure to point out how the self-labeled experimentation and boundary-breaking of “energy players” – by which he meant musicians who created collective improvisations of extreme rhythmic density, harmonic dissonance, and often loud dynamics – was now a style of playing that was over 40 years

¹⁰ While the roster of musicians at the Vision Fest far outnumbers these few, it is typical to see the above-mentioned musicians featured in more than one performance per festival, and sometimes as many as five or six. These names, among others, also figure prominently in Currie’s (2009) dissertation on the Vision Festival.

old. But he was also fed up by his inability to find an outlet for his own music, even within the ostensibly boundless eclecticism that AFA discursively promoted.

I further realized the significance of Patrick's partly oppositional stance towards the Vision Festival when we finally were able to listen to jazz recordings and get to the nitty-gritty of musical style and form. When we had spoken about the idea to do this before, he had mentioned he could point out how Albert Ayler's playing on *Spiritual Unity* – a landmark recording of the 1960s jazz avant-garde and possibly the most well-known item in the ESP-Disk catalogue – was full of motivic development and compositional logic. Our listening session took place at Patrick's home in a third-floor, walkup apartment in Ridgewood, Queens.

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Patrick cues up “Ghosts: First Variation,” the first track on *Spiritual Unity* (Ayler 2005a). He sets the CD to play. We listen to the first sounds moments on the album: an opening phrase Ayler plays on tenor sax - a quick melodic cell, crisply articulated. It sounds like a stutter. Ayler continues with a longer melody (see Figure 10). This phrase does not clearly describe any harmonic center, but Patrick notes that it sets up a clear duple meter and presents a rhythmic profile that foreshadows phrases of the melody proper (see Figures 10 and 11c).



Figure 10. Excerpt from “Ghosts: First Variation” (0:02-0:06), on *Spiritual Unity*.

“Okay, then it gets to this *Civil War-sounding* shit,” Patrick jokes about the simple harmonic vocabulary of Ayler’s composition and stiff rhythms with which Ayler plays a the first section of the tune proper (Figure 11a). The A-phrase of “Ghosts” contrasts with the first 10 seconds of the recording *because* of its clear tonality. I agree with Patrick that on *this* particular rendition of “Ghosts,” the Ayler’s micro-level rhythmic phrasing, along with the dotted rhythms of Phrases A and B, suggest a marching song such as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (On other recordings, Ayler’s melodic phrasing and his rhythm section’s accompaniment suggest calypso music far more than 19th-century American marches or folk tunes.) “Standard harmony with thirds,” Patrick comments on the interplay between Ayler and bassist Gary Peacock, as we listen to the trio play the B phrase of “Ghosts” (see Figure 11b).

flexible tempo; ♩ = ca. 200

"Then he gets to this Civil War-sounding shit"

Tenor Sax

rit.

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**Figure 11b. Phrase B of “Ghosts: First Variation” (0:22-0:27).
Tenor sax/bass interplay, as noted by Patrick Brennan.**



**Figure 11c. Phrase C of “Ghosts: First Variation” (0:33-0:38).
Compare to the rhythmic profile of Figure 10.**

Ayler’s various recordings of “Ghosts” demonstrate that he consistently used the three phrases I’ve notated in Figures 11a – 11c. As he renders them in the first track on *Spiritual Unity*, each phrase lasts four measures and is characterized by simple rhythms and melodic pitches drawn from the underlying harmonies. His flexible approach to form, tempo, and rhythmic feel are evident in the various ways Ayler and his ensembles add melodic ornamentation, stretch and compress the duration of each phrase through dramatic shifts in tempo, and vary the number of times they repeat each of the three phrases. On this track, the trio repeats each of the three melodic phrases of “Ghosts” once, creating a 24-bar structure described as AABGCC.¹¹

¹¹ For other versions of “Ghosts,” see the recordings *Holy Ghost* (2004), *Love Cry* (1991), and *New Grass* (2005b). While Ayler’s references to saxophonist Sonny Rollins and his calypso-styled compositions remain subdued or implicit on most renditions of “Ghosts” (including the *Spiritual Unity* version I am discussing here), Ayler makes his tribute to Rollins explicit on “New Ghosts” (2005b), where the rhythm section maintains a steady 4/4 calypso beat and Ayler adjusts his saxophone style to sound far more like Rollins than he typically did from 1964 to 1968.

We are now listening to the beginning moments of Ayler's improvisation. "It's a harmonic variation of the tune, of what he did in the introduction," Patrick remarks as we listen to Ayler play lines with rhythms derived from the composition's melody. "Still inside the shape of the melody, that—that was a *phrase*." I've notated the phrases to which Patrick refers in Figure 12. Note the appearance of microtonal inflections and overblown notes (which I have indicated in parentheses), signaling Ayler's gradual departure from the diatonic/tonal harmonic field of the composition.



Figure 12. First phrases of Ayler's solo on "Ghosts: First Variation" (0:44-0:55).

"He hasn't left—his *head* hasn't left the melody yet," Patrick adds. He sings one of Ayler's phrases just after hearing it on the recording, mimicking it and externalizing his listening act, making it audible to me. "He's changing the pitch, but not the *rhythm* so much." Patrick continues to hear Ayler reiterate the rhythmic contour of the composition's melody, even as Ayler's pitch choices move further from its tonal harmonies.

Ayler accelerates the rate of his melodic invention and development soon after beginning his solo, so that musical events occur more quickly as they continue to occur.

Patrick is not only contending with the continuous forward motion of the recording – of sound happening in time – he is also trying to keep up with his own thoughts. His words come quickly. In a way his commentary echoes the forward rush of Ayler’s playing itself. A few times Patrick’s words come tumbling from his mouth; he interrupts himself in mid-sentence to pick up a new line of thinking as it occurs to him. Of necessity, Patrick’s “play-by-play commentary” style of music analysis becomes broad; Ayler’s ideas come too rapidly to allow him to comment on each phrase. We have listened to about the first two minutes of “Ghosts.” I ask Patrick to pause the CD, so that we may discuss a question I have for him without losing our place in the recording.

MS: So, he’s hanging on to . . . he sped up the chromatic thing [from the B phrase of the melody], which got him into the fast like, [*I mimic Ayler’s high-speed, chromatic melismas*] and...

PB: [*overlaps with me, mimicking a non-tonal variation of the melody in Figure 11a, again emphasizing that he hears Ayler continually playing variations on his composed melody*]

MS: —now *that’s* the point of departure – it’s the lower register—

PB: —so, yeah, so he takes that and then . . . he’s now, his own ideas have come in so strongly that *those* ideas are now things that he’s building on top of. So it’s like a *second* generation...

And if you watch, you’ll hear him breath and you’ll hear that each phrase is really clearly shaped. Right? And that he does stop and he makes it so not only *he*, but the *listener*, can hear that there’s a shape there, a melodic shape with kind of a beginning, middle and an end, cause even though its [*Patrick sings an impression of Ayler’s dissonant, non-tempered melismas using a growly tone to vocally mimic the rough timbre of the saxophone*] all that shit, it’s still got that same kinda thing [improvised phrases based upon the harmonic, intervallic and rhythmic content of the tune’s melody and related to the 32-bar form of the tune] and now that’s also important because he’s communicating with his bassist and his drummer...

...But I do think that you can get so carried away by the sound . in Albert’s music [e.g., Ayler’s use of multiphonics, shrieks, and microtonal inflections] that you just—and especially cause you got that floating drum sound [Sunny Murray does

not define any meter in his drumming], right, that you just kind of get lost so you don't really catch it.

We put the CD back on and Patrick continues to point out the principles of Ayler's improvised variation. Then, a discrete melodic phrase particularly moves and excites Patrick. Patrick sings an approximation of the phrase immediately after we hear it on the CD; his singing overlaps with the very end of the phrase. "*Ohhhh*, that's a *great* phrase!!" Patrick growls this.¹²

Figure 13 shows my transcription of the melody Albert Ayler plays, as highlighted by Patrick's verbal commentary. I have applied several filters to the information conveyed in this transcription, several limits on the data I consider here. First, I have elected to notate only the musical material that Ayler himself plays, since Patrick's remarks at this particular moment only concerned Ayler's playing. Second, I have simplified my notation of pitch and harmonic information. Here, as in Figure 12, I use the conventions of Western notation to indicate microtonal accidentals to indicate the ways that Ayler's playing weaves in between the 12 semitones of equal temperament. A crucial factor determining the timbral quality of this phrase is Ayler's employment of multiphonics. Where the fundamental below an overblown note is especially audible, I have notated it in parentheses.

¹² Whenever I listen to my recording of this session, I hear Patrick's growl as a moment of mimesis: while Patrick's growling tone conveyed emphasis and the pleasure he felt at listening to this phrase, it also approximated the multiphonics of Ayler's saxophone playing. I hear Patrick's use of a growling vocal timbre as a similar kind of embodied, participatory listening to Steve Dalachinsky's sonic manipulation of words during the performance that I analyze in Chapter 3.



Figure 13. Excerpt from “Ghosts: First Variation” (2:15-2:18).
“Ohhhh, that’s a great phrase!”

My simplified and reductive notation of multiphonics is a result of what I perceive as the intersection of ethnographic evidence and methodological orientation in this instance. Patrick sings the melody back as though it is monophonic. This implies that he hears the phrase as part of a monophonic gestalt. Patrick continually talked about Ayler’s “lines” and “melodies;” he never remarked on or implied that he heard Ayler’s multiphonic notes as chords, tone-clusters, or the like.

The questions of whether or not to notate Ayler’s multiphonics and *how* to notate them pertain to larger and longer-standing debates about methodology with regard to transcription in ethnomusicology and jazz scholarship.¹³ Explicitly or implicitly, nearly all music analysis dealing with avant-garde jazz gives an account of the challenges in employing existent academic models of music analysis to the genre. While transcription of segments of musical performance into Western notation typically undergird analysis of mainstream jazz, various elements of avant-garde are incommensurable with the visual syntax of Western notation (Baker 1973; Borgo 2005; Currie 2009; Jost 1975; Medwin 2008; Such 1993). David Borgo writes that avant-garde jazz, among other styles of free improvisation,

¹³ Ellingson (1992) provides a thorough discussion of the history of transcription in ethnomusicological scholarship.

tends to devalue the two dimensions that have traditionally dominated music representation—quantized pitch and metered durations—in favor of the microsubtleties of timbral and temporal modification and the surprising and emergent properties of individual and collective creativity in the moment of performance. (Borgo 2005:3)

In his style analysis of John Coltrane’s music during 1965-1967, Marc Medwin explains the principles guiding his use of transcribed musical examples:

Because the music under discussion is documented in this way [on sound recordings], I have elected to use sound examples where conventional notation is not appropriate and traditional transcription in those circumstances where it supports my hearing of the music. Coltrane’s solos, for example, still rely mainly on material that exists in the domain of conventional pitch. Unlike Pharaoh Sanders, he does not resort to the hugely emotive but ultimately un-notatable moans and shrieks so prevalent in the 1960s ‘free jazz’ saxophone repertoire. (Medwin 2008:24)

Even with Coltrane’s general adherence to a 12-semitone pitch vocabulary, Medwin makes limited use of transcriptions. The other major obstacle to representing this music in Western notation stems from the rhythmic style Coltrane explored in the last two years of his life. Medwin notes that, beginning in 1965, Coltrane stopped organizing the temporal domain of his music according to meter; instead, his late music was characterized by either an absence of meter or by the superimposition of clashing meters or tempos.

Medwin does not systematically list the profound challenges this “meterlessness” poses to transcription via Western notation, but I can imagine the pitfalls. When analyzing a performance in which musicians organize the temporal distribution of musical events according to meter, the transcriber has an aural touchstone against which to hear sounds in time. Even if an ensemble makes an effort to greatly obscure the metric scheme underlying its performance, if meter continues to function as an organizing

principle among the musicians, sooner or later one of them will play in such a way as to refer to the meter, giving the transcriber an aural signpost. Meter in music helps to orient a listener in time. In comparison, attempting to use Western notation to transcribe a segment of music performed by Coltrane's final quartet would eventually become a zero-sum game. If you were able completely to identify all pitch material played by John Coltrane, pianist Alice Coltrane, and bassist Jimmy Garrison (already a daunting task), how would you choose to notate duration in their parts? If you were able to hear the infinitesimal details of the temporal relations among these pitched musical parts and chart those musical events along the *x*-axis (as Western notation maps temporal flow onto horizontal space), what would be the shortest durational unit you'd notate? And we still have not dealt with the rich layers of rhythm that Rashied Ali played on his drum kit – not merely a fourth rhythmic line, but a part that exponentially complicates the total rhythmic activity.¹⁴

¹⁴ I find Medwin's prose descriptions of Ali's drumming style both precisely analytical and poetic: "After Coltrane begins the track with bells, as he does every piece on the album, a rapid series of snare taps are heard. The snare is actually fairly close to being steady, and it is clear that Ali is also hitting a tom-tom at the same time as the snare. The snare and the tom-tom gradually drift apart, conjuring images of Steve Reich's contemporaneous phase pieces. Another rhythmic layer is added as Ali sets up another tempo with the pedal of the high-hat, first closing it and then opening it in what sound like loosely metric reversed dactylic patterns. Simultaneously, the bass drum adds another rhythmic layer, vaguely complementing the tom patterns. It is the perfect representation of what Coltrane calls 'multidirectional rhythms.' Unfortunately, *these rhythmic patterns do not maintain a steady tempo, fluctuating wildly almost as soon as they are established*. All of this occurs before Coltrane's bells have faded, at which point the patterns have become irregular" (2008: 107-108, my italics). Medwin hears Ali *suggesting*, though *not* defining, multiple rhythmic cycles or tempos at once and immediately ambiguating those suggestions. Here is another example: "Ali's work in the opening bars of 'Ogunde' is the most dynamically varied of the group. His playing might be described as more of an atmospheric rustle, his brushwork barely on equal dynamic footing with the piano. Accents are most certainly present, but they are neither metric nor necessarily indicative of anything beyond themselves and the rhythmic complexity and displacement they afford. In fact, the substrata of his playing continually threatens to obscure them, bringing the dynamic levels in his playing into more equal focus" (2008:109). Here, Medwin argues that Ali was placing volume

Let's say that you *were* able to accurately map out all musical events within a forty-five second excerpt of a recording by the last Coltrane Quartet. The density of visual information confronting any reader would be overwhelming. A more profound problem than this transcription's cumbersomeness would be its inefficacy as an analytic tool. While transcription always involves interpretive choices, the conceptual gap between rhythmic style of Coltrane's late music and the notions of temporality that are implicit within the representational codes of Western notation are fundamentally incommensurable. The act of translating one's perception of rhythm and temporal flow in a late-Coltrane performance into the visual data of a score would result in a distortion of the sonic information drastic enough to render the operation futile.

This brings me back to Medwin's music-theoretical arguments about the rhythmic style Coltrane developed with his last groups. Medwin describes the non-metric approach as creating a sense of "vertical time," that is, a feeling of suspension of time. The absence of audible meter is crucial in creating one's experience of vertical or non-linear time, of a musical flow that is not goal-directed. Medwin contrasts this with the typically powerful sense of *forward* motion or *drive* the swing feel evokes in musicians and listeners (Medwin 2008:30–41). For me, Medwin's interpretation of rhythmic style in late Coltrane suggests why both Coltrane's music *and* other avant-garde jazz that organizes rhythm outside the structures of meter prove so difficult to notate: there is no hierarchy of beats or rhythmic accents in this music. It would be a stretch to conclude from this that

on a level almost equal to rhythm as an expressive and formal parameter, centralizing dynamics far more than was typical for jazz drumming up to that point.

every sound or note in one of these Coltrane performances is equally important; Medwin notes that listeners will hear certain accents as stronger than others, certain pitch-classes as bearing more harmonic weight than others. But he believes the perception of such moments of formal articulation will be transient and could vary from one hearing to the next.

Notably, when Medwin employs transcriptions (both his own and published transcriptions by musician/scholar Andrew White) in his discussion of Coltrane's late style, he almost exclusively deals with notations of Coltrane's saxophone lines (167-177). Similarly, Lewis Porter limits his extended analysis of "Venus," a 1967 duet recording Coltrane made with Ali, to a transcription and discussion of Coltrane's playing. White's and Porter's transcriptions are documents of virtuosic listening. These two scholars notate the pitch content of Coltrane's playing in extreme detail, including his use of multiphonics, of which he had achieved a profound command by the end of his life. They represent the rhythmic profile of Coltrane's melismatic improvisations using standard durational values of Western notation (e.g., 8th-, 16th-, and 32nd-notes), but the knowledgeable reader will understand that these note values are relative and approximate.

This is a key point. The primary analytical *use* to which Medwin and Porter put these transcriptions of Coltrane's playing during his late period is *harmonic* analysis. To be sure, both White's and Porter's notations give a sense of the temporal flow of Coltrane's melodies, of which notes he sustains and which he touches upon fleetingly. But Medwin and Porter concern themselves more with interpreting Coltrane's choices in the domain of pitch.

I deploy Western musical notation, despite its obvious limitations, as part of my analytic discussion here because most of the musicians with whom I conducted research are literate in and often employ notation for various purposes.¹⁵ If asked, jazz musicians usually note the limitations of Western notation in representing the sonorities of jazz. Yet jazz musicians constantly use notation when transcribing for the ways in which *can be* useful and do not fret about the ways in which it falls short. In addition, transcribing solos from recordings has long been a fundamental pedagogical device and heuristic exercise for jazz musicians (Berliner 1994). As I discuss above, Patrick himself noted that he would not be able to transcribe the rhythmic variation and flexibility he hears in Ornette Coleman's playing. His invoking transcription as a useful exercise for describing and thinking about rhythmic detail is typical among jazz musicians.

Therefore, my transcription in Figure 13 is *not* an attempt to notate the phrase the way Patrick heard it. Instead, Figure 13 depicts how I have come to hear the phrase Patrick pointed out in the course of listening, informed using his songful, vocal interaction with the recording. While I spent a good deal of time listening to this passage of "Ghosts" in order to notate its pitch content with some accuracy, the focus and impetus of this work was shaped and given direction by Patrick's observations. In a practical as well as a theoretical sense, "my" transcription in Figure 13 is the result of collaboration. I present Figure 13 as a documentation of a *specific* hearing, perhaps even a specific *moment* or *instance* of hearing. My transcription has to do with the way Patrick

¹⁵ Similarly, Monson observes that she had no qualms representing jazz improvisation using Western musical notation since it is used by nearly all jazz musicians (1996: 23).

Brennan heard and talked about Albert Ayler's playing on one afternoon. This transcription does not show the reader how Ayler sounds in an absolute sense, but rather it shows *something about* how a historically- and socially-situated listener heard him.

Transcribing the "great phrase" that Patrick remarked on helped me to hear with greater sensitivity. The necessary actions involved in transcribing – listening repeatedly, thinking about how I wanted to notate the sounds I heard, continually going back to the recording of my interview with Patrick – were the moments and places where I made sense of how Patrick hears Ayler. The overall project of transcribing forces contemplation; it is this contemplation that often bears the fruit of interpretive and analytical insight. Music scholars often argue that music notation allows the scholar to metaphorically "slow down" musical flow and study a passage of music that would be over in a moment when heard; I would modify this argument to claim that the benefits of transcribing lie in the ways it necessitates repeated hearings. If there is a conceptual slowing down that occurred in my transcribing a passage of music and then analyzing my transcription, it derives from the ways that time subjectively seems to slow down while I pondered a few seconds of sound. But *within* this conceptual pause, I listened to, mimicked, and thought about the passage over and over and over.

To continue recounting our conversation where I left off: "*Ohhh that's a grrreat phrase, I love—he, this, this shit blows me away!*" Patrick exclaims, his excitement making his words come faster than he can handle them. Once again we listen to the "great phrase"; Patrick lets forth a wordless exclamation of admiration, this time a quick sigh. "That's not even a long solo, but it's really very coherent," Patrick remarks after Ayler

ends his improvisation. “Anyway, that’s just a quick visit to Albert. But that’s the stuff—and this is my *favorite* recording of his, this is the one that has that the most.”

Why did the phrase shown in Figure 13 *particularly* excite Patrick? In a solo that he considers masterful, it stuck out as a musical peak, a moment of special brilliance and creativity. Patrick’s remarks during our conversation contain several clues as to why.

...And if you watch you’ll hear him breath, and you’ll hear that each phrase is really clearly shaped...

...But I do think that you can get so carried away by the sound...that you just kind of get lost so you don’t really catch it...

...That’s not even a long solo, but it’s really very coherent...

The melody in Figure 13 provides an especially potent example of Ayler’s employment of motivic development as a principle for musical improvisation. The accompaniment that Peacock and Murray play behind Ayler during this phrase implies several tempos, rhythmic feels, and meters without firmly clearly residing in any of them – it is a classic example of the “freeness” of “free jazz.” But Ayler’s phrase itself clearly implies duple meter in a tempo only moderately faster than that which the band set at the beginning of the performance. The dactylic rhythmic organization of Figure 13 (long-short-short) echoes the squarely 4/4 rhythmic phrasing of the melody of “Ghosts.” Patrick remarked that he heard Ayler continually referring back to the rhythm of the melody of the tune, while varying its pitch and harmonic content, during his solo. Figure 13, then, excited Patrick because of the way Ayler managed both to reference and provide a contrast to the melody. Here Ayler transforms the squarely triadic framework of his composition, recasting it in a chromatic harmonic field. Adding to the harmonic

ambiguity and complexity are the multiphonics Ayler plays. These multiphonics make Ayler's notes sound thicker than if he had played them using regular technique. While Patrick heard dominant pitches within these multiphonic sonorities (as evidenced by his vocal imitation of the line) – the growl in his spoken exclamation about the phrase indexes his perception of its multiphonic timbral signature.

For Patrick, Ayler was maintaining the rigor of compositionally-based musical logic while infusing it with the expressive richness that his timbral and harmonic innovations afford. Patrick observed that “you can get so carried away by the sound” and speculated that Ayler himself struggled with the challenge of maintaining musical interest while playing within the “free” idiom he had helped forge. Patrick was demonstrating his keen listening skills: the ability to hear *both* Ayler's mastery of melodic material through the more “tradition” approach of harmonic and melodic variation *and* Ayler's experimental impetus, made audible in his use of timbres and phrasing derived from African-American gospel, R&B, and blues styles.

Whether deliberate or unconscious, the phenomenon of Patrick's vocal mimesis of Ayler's saxophonic timbre illuminates an important facet of Patrick's listening habitus. Patrick's choice to speak his praise – “*ohhh*, that's a *great* phrase” – with a growl may have *felt* like the “right” way for him to exclaim, a way of using vocal timbre to expressive ends that fit with his notions of himself as listener, musician, and embodied individual. This was not the only time Patrick ever spoke in a growling tone; there were other times when he shifted to a vocal growl when expressing enthusiasm or excitement. But in this instance, the growl running through Patrick's phonation of “*ohhh*” and “*grrreat*” achieves

an iconicity linking the aural and kinesthetic experiences of jazz improvisation. Just as jazz musicians take pleasure in “digging in” to a groove, Patrick, taking pleasure in Ayler’s saxophony, dug into his own vocal apparatus.

Patrick had taken Albert Ayler out of the world of apparently cacophonous free blowing, downplayed his reputation as an “energy player,” and placed him within the compositional tradition that Patrick admires. For Patrick, Ayler *was* a great player because he wedded compositional logic to new timbres and textures and extended tried-and-true principles of jazz further. To appreciate Ayler *only* for his exploration of timbre, to only hear his shrieks and saxophonic glossolalia, is to hear at a surface level. This was a point that Patrick returned to again and again in our conversations: he believed that the great avant-garde players didn’t and don’t “just play free.” The musical freedom they achieve is defined against a rigorous treatment of interacting ensemble parts, and a purposeful use of rhythmic and melodic musical motives; it is a precise, disciplined freedom. Patrick listens for this kind of playing, this kind of musical disposition within the jazz tradition.

But this moment of listening wasn’t just about how Patrick Brennan makes sense of one of his musical idols. It was about Patrick’s notion of how and where he fits within the jazz tradition. He grew up in a white suburb of Detroit and found himself attracted to and enthralled by the musical traditions of African Americans. The musicians whom he considers mentors, who taught him either through in-person interaction or by recorded and performed example, are those who balanced spontaneity and energy with the discipline of musical form: Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Charles

Gayle, Thelonious Monk, Henry Threadgill. During our conversation in his home, he expounded on how he heard Ayler working within the traditions established by prior jazz musicians. Patrick's own creative engagement with the jazz tradition grows from this hearing.

Patrick listens to *Spiritual Unity* as a musician who asks himself questions about how to balance structure with spontaneity. We did not overtly discuss the way his position as a *practitioner* shapes his listening and aural-interpretive processes, but this theme suffused our conversations. Patrick used words connoting emotion and affect throughout our conversations, telling me he "loved that phrase" or that hearing Ornette Coleman live has provided him with some of the "most intense listening experiences." Yet the poetics he employed in talking about aural experiences (both as a listener and while performing) created an almost seamless blend of the language of affect and the jargon of music theory. The nuts and bolts of music – rhythms, chords, melodic style – were inextricable from the emotional effect they communicated to or exerted upon him.

Patrick's opposition to AFA's dominant position within the LES scene was in part caused by his feelings of being pushed to the margins of the Vision Festival's de facto roster of artists. Ironically, this meant that he was on the margins of the dominant institution in a music scene that claims marginality. But he also opposed the Vision Festival because of his sense that, using the Festival as its mechanism, AFA had been promoting too narrow a definition of the jazz avant-garde in its practices of scheduling and organizing concerts, even while its words paid lip-service to a boundless eclecticism. I first registered that Patrick considered his aesthetics to be distinct from the avant-jazz

“mainstream” that the Vision Fest represented from statements in which he explicitly talked about the Festival and AFA. But as our conversations continued, and particularly as I studied my notes and recordings, I realized he was amplifying the sentiments he expressed in his statements about the politics of AFA’s intra-scene hegemony in his talk about musical style. This came through in the way he chose to narrate his experience of listening to the members of Ornette Coleman’s early quartet, the way he expounded his perception of Charles Gayle’s musical excellence, and the way he performed a verbal analysis of Albert Ayler. He was engaging in the social practice of genre, pushing back against the ways he saw AFA defining the avant-jazz scene from the top down, and articulating this oppositional argument through omission, by praising musicians whom he considered the *real thing*.

5.4 The Feeling of Rough Edges: The Many Meanings of Musical Timbre

The type of music-analytical talk that I engaged in with Patrick Brennan was something of an exception among my conversations with LES scene participants, including other musicians. Trombonist Steve Swell and I also got into detailed discussions of sonic nuances, but we did not consider formal parameters to the extent that Brennan and I did. Whereas Brennan felt he was on the margins of a scene in which AFA had staked out the central ground, Swell occupies a different position within the LES scene: he was a much more regular part of the weekly RUCMA series than Brennan was, and he also has been featured in the Vision Festival on a regular basis. Though he is not as central a figure as William Parker, the late David Ware, or the late Roy Campbell, Swell

regularly performs with Parker's large ensembles, collaborated with Roy Campbell, and continues to perform with other AFA icons. Therefore Swell holds a firm place *within* AFA's avant-jazz "mainstream."

The conversations I recorded with Steve Swell took place in his home, and we therefore were able to listen to recordings together. During one of our conversations, he played me a recording by avant-garde jazz violinist Leroy Jenkins. His choice to put the track on was prompted by a previous conversation, during which Swell had cited a short essay by Walt Whitman titled "Five Thousand Poems" as an inspiration (Whitman 1982:1184). He emailed me the piece so that I could read it. When I next saw Swell, I followed up on with him on the Whitman piece and asked him to elaborate on its meaning for him.

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Sitting on Swell's couch in his apartment on Union Square in Manhattan, I work out some of my reactions to the Whitman piece, thinking out loud, "The thing that I thought about was the idea that, like you said, he was talking about...tons of failures or attempts sometimes at least sprouting one *good* thing. But there was some passage in where he was talking about...it made me think that he really thinks that everything that has been done in any human endeavor is linked to whatever's being done now, that whenever you're doing something you're...you're kind of linked to everything else that's taken place in that realm. I mean I think he was talking about poems. I wish I remembered the..." Swell has been injecting verbalizations of assent, a quick "yeah," a couple of repetitions of "right" while I plug along.

“Yeah, I think I remember what you’re saying, yeah.” But as our conversation moves along, he hones in on a different theme, or different interpretation, of the Whitman piece. “Yeah, and also he was talking culturally, too, even that you could be...some other culture in some other time, and still expressing some basic *human* qualities and characteristics...it’s universal through *all* time.”

“Is that something that speaks to you [the idea that, through art, one can express something deeply human and applicable to all human history] *about* that short piece? Do you feel like—”

“Oh, *yeah* yeah yeah. I probably don’t think about it *enough*...specifically in that way. I mean I do—I try to keep a journal about when I practice and what I’m trying to look for. Um...one thing that comes to mind is, um, Leroy Jenkins...this one solo record he’s got. There’s such an *old*...kinda *sound* that he gets, and I don’t mean old in a decrepit way—”

“No, no no!” I interject while laughing.

Swell continues, “—I mean *old* in a fine...just classical, mature, kind of ancient...it’s just something that *connects* across all time and all space and all culture. And I’m trying to get to *that* essence in my music.”

Internally, I become excited. I don’t have to prompt Swell to pick out an album or recording that holds special meaning for him; serendipitously it has come up in the course of our conversation. I must probe him about this idea of an “old sound.”

“Would you—could you put it on? That would be cool.”

As he walks into another room to retrieve the CD, Swell continues, “I mean, *just*, his *sound* alone . . you know, he just puts the bow on the string and . you’re just *right* there.”

Once Swell cues up the track, we listen together in silence with the exception of one or two comments about the date of the recording. It is approximately five and half minutes of solo viola.¹⁶ While we listen, I note to myself that Jenkins gradually moves from triadic material with a heavy emphasis on arpeggios into more dissonant harmonic territory; his bowing grows more forceful, his vibrato gets very wide. I mutter an “mmm” as I register the change in musical rhetoric, the move “outside.” Jenkins continues this loose, comfortable alternation between more triadic and more “out” passages through the remainder of the track.

Swell sits quietly and smiles at me as the viola gives way to silence. I feel pressure – pleasantly invigorating – to make a comment that demonstrates my listening chops: “Wow, yeah . . .” Swell chuckles as I gather up some words for my thoughts, “That’s cool. He makes it . . . the thing I was hearing is that when he goes out, he makes it sound—that it’s *not* out.” I feel almost as though Swell is now interviewing *me*, studying *my* reactions to get a sense of how good my ears are.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s still connected,” he glosses, his smile growing wider.

I am encouraged by his reply. “It’s kind of very seamless and it’s . . . the non-tonal stuff sounds very organically coming out of the tonal stuff.”

We seem to be working out an interpretation, a *hearing* of the recording, in dialogic fashion. Swell responds to my statement: “I think a lot of guys from his

¹⁶ In the conversation Swell and I continually refer to Jenkins’ “violin” although I later found out that he plays viola on this track. Jenkins is primarily known as a violinist. I leave the quotations from our interview “as-is,” but refer to Jenkins’ viola in the rest of the discussion. See Jenkins (1998); the track Swell and I listened to is titled “Folk Song.”

generation...they have that in their music, cause a lot of them were coming from really straight music and they were at the nexus of when that started to—when freer stuff was happening, so that is still very much in their playing.”

I want to push him on what he hears as being “old”: “So when you said the sound itself sounds ‘old’ and he’s tapping into something timeless . . like the timbre and the sound production? You mean aside from the harmonic language?”

“Yeah, *yeah*, exactly. Exactly. . yeah,” Swell answers enthusiastically. “Yeah . . just the way it’s—I kind of like, I wrote this down once: when he attacks a note—and I’m trying to get that in my playing a little bit—it’s sort of like . . it’s there, it’s pointed and it’s centered . . but still there’s sort of, there’s some little rough edge around the outside of it.”

“I know what you mean.”

“It’s nice.”

I want to get more of a sense of his hearing of timbre: “You would say...I mean would you say there’s a definite attack but it’s not a perfectly *clean* attack?”

“Ummm . . it’s more than that because the attack is there and it’s centered, but it’s more like at the . . you know, as the sound . . ”

“Continues?” I venture while Swell pauses in thought. Our speech has begun to overlap. Though our conversation is riddled with false starts and pauses, we have gotten into a little groove in talking out our hearing. We are “caught in...moment[s] of interpretive time, trying to force awareness to words” (Feld 1984:14).

“Yeah, somehow from the center out...just that edge of the sound. The center’s there, I mean it’s very clear, his articulation is clear but it’s just something about the sound of it that’s just a little...you know, like rather than a perfect square cut out of a piece

of paper, it's a little jagged around the edges a little. It gives it a very *real* . . . thing. I mean he's just doing it that way. I don't know . . . didn't know him at all, really. So . . . you know, that's just the way he plays."

"Yeah . and so . can you trace what about that sound production sounds or feels old to you?"

"Oh, how does it feel old to me . . . I guess the . . . I guess the thing . it's like, everything now, everything from food to movies to computers, everything is sharp and uh . you know, perfect. Everything's processed. " I mutter comprehension and Swell continues,

"in a certain kind of way where..you know, you go listen to classical violin players, they won't have that little kind of edginess to the sound. Everything's very clean, everything's gotta be kind of spotless. And they're working on it that way. You know, the more clean it is without any little ragged anything to it, that's what they're going for. I dunno, maybe it's just that the violin lends itself naturally to that kind of sound..you hear it more in a trombone or a brass instrument. You hear Miles Davis, you know, they had this thing that his playing was like 'walking on eggshells' [*Swell modulates his intonation to convey his use of a quotation*] . . . you heard that expression? You hear a lot of classically-trained trumpet players—that sound is just so pure and centered there's just nothing else there. And what happens is . . . a lot of them start to sound alike. You know, you lose your personality."

Swell pauses and then summarizes his thoughts on an "old" sound. "I guess what I mean by 'ancient' and 'old' is . . . more of your personality is in there, more of your humanness is in it."

I was not expecting Swell to land up in this discursive territory in ruminating on how he heard Leroy Jenkins' sound on viola as being "old." When he first uttered the words "old sound" – before we listened to the CD – my ears and mind perked up. This felt evocative and idiosyncratic; I hadn't heard jazz musicians use the word "old" as an adjective of praise. Now Swell is getting very close to conflating "oldness" with

“authenticity;” the rough texture around the edges of Jenkins’ viola timbre “gives it a very real...thing.”¹⁷

“Yeah. So . . for you Miles also has that . . ” I prompt him.

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.”

“—it’s almost like a sonic halo, kind of?” I attempt another visual metaphor to get at the timbral aesthetic we are talking around.

“Yeah yeah yeah, I mean, he’s the classic example of that.”

“Yeah, I was thinking of him. I was gonna ask you to name other people. How about people who are alive now, who you’ve maybe played with?”

“Uhh . well, Roswell [Rudd] does that. He’s definitely got that. It’s—I mean technically, it’s kinda what they used to call a ‘burry’ b-u-r-r-y kind of sound. Not blurry but it’s . . [clicks tongue to signal the ineffability of the quality] it’s raw—”

I mean to help Swell but I end up interrupting: “It’s, in a classic—I was gonna say if you’re studying with a classical teacher they’re gonna . . [hand gesture of pushing aside]”

“Yeah, they’ll—”

“—steer you away from that.”

“Yeah, right right. They’ll say, ‘Oh you can clean that up a little’—”

¹⁷ For a hermeneutical discussion of hearing “oldness” in the sense of aging and senescence, see Ake (2010:37–53).

“—especially with brass, I know cuz I remember my first trumpet teacher when there would be any buzz he’d be like, ‘See that? *Tighten that up*’ [with my lips, I mime a trumpet embouchure and gesture towards it with my hand] ‘There’s air escaping.’”

“Right right,” Swell overlaps with me. We’ve gotten into a bit of brass-player “shop talk.” I help this along in part because again I want to demonstrate my knowledge to Swell. Swell said, *You hear a lot of classically-trained trumpet players—that sound is just so pure and centered there’s just nothing else there.* He has invoked a typical rejoinder to jazz musicians’ sense of an implicit and ubiquitous criticism from the “classical world” that jazz players often possess inferior technical ability on their instrument.¹⁸ A “pure and centered” tone is also a tone without personality, without individuality, and therefore the timbral ideal for a concert trumpeter is *inferior* when evaluated according to jazz aesthetics.

Swell returns to the question of which living musicians possess an “old sound”: “Uhh...who else is doing that?”

“But I mean there’s . . . there’s an actual skill and aesthetic in that [creating a sound with ‘rough edges’].” I want to perform my solidarity with Swell’s perspective, to let him know that I *get it*, that I realize brass players in jazz – and moreover many, if not most, instrumentalists in jazz – are not *trying* to achieve the tonal/timbral ideal established by the classical world.

“*Yeah*, it’s an aesthetic,” he confirms.

¹⁸ By describing it as “jazz musicians’ sense” of criticism from classical musicians, I do not mean to invalidate or minimize that feeling. On several occasions, I have heard classically-trained brass musicians speak disparagingly of jazz musicians’ technique.

“It’s not just, like, an error.” In hammering the point home, I suppose I’m trying to spur him on to expound further.

“*No no*. Absolutely not . . . I mean that’s what makes music interesting. If somebody with a really developed musical personality, I mean you could say, you listen to Rob Brown, you say, ‘Yeah!’ I *love* listening to him. Or Jemeel Moondoc. I *love* listening to Jemeel Moondoc. They just have . . . they got themselves wired in such a way that it just comes off as very very *real* and unique.”¹⁹

From “old” to “unique” and “personal.” When Swell first began to talk through his notion of Jenkins’ “old sound” he implied that it meant a style that has withstood the test of time. *I mean old in a fine...just classical, mature, kind of ancient...it’s just something that connects across all time and all space and all culture*. “Classical” here bears little resemblance to the “classical” we later discussed when we talked about participants in the Western art music tradition; in deploying the word “classical” to unpack his descriptor “old,” he was probably using an *older* connotation: Classical Antiquity. He wasn’t literally making a claim that Leroy Jenkins’ style resembles Hellenic or Roman music. But by using adjectives like “fine,” “classical,” “old,” “mature,” “ancient,” Swell was trying to put words to an affective reaction he has to Jenkins’ playing. He was verbally riffing on the *feel* that the viola sound has for him, the connotations it has for him, or, the connotative meanings Swell creates *with* Jenkins’ sound.

Swell first linked “old” to an identifiable timbral characteristic when he mentioned the “rough edge” of Jenkins’ tone. He went on to lament the current cultural-historical

¹⁹ Incidentally, Brown and Moondoc are both saxophonists with whom Swell has professional relationships.

moment in which “everything is sharp . perfect . everything is processed.” By “old,” Swell also could have meant that which predates his sense of post-industrial late capitalism, of the commoditized, mass produced reality of the early 21st century. In *not* adhering to the “processed” aesthetics of slickly-produced Hollywood movies, fast and/or frozen food, and streamlined electronic devices, an *old* sound proudly wears its idiosyncrasy – even its “imperfections” – on its sleeve. This makes it, in Swell’s words, more “human.”

As our conversation progressed, Swell’s notion of “old” aligned itself with one of the central tropes of jazz culture: creating one’s own sound. Having a sound of one’s own means developing a *distinctive* musical style or persona; it means being sonically recognizable to another jazz musician (Berliner 1994; Jackson 2012; Monson 1996). The jazz musician who has created his own sound (I use the masculine pronoun as the trope itself is masculinist, see (Lipsitz 2004) has remained loyal to the aesthetics of the tradition; he is imbued with the symbolic capital of *authenticity*. As I allude to above, I did not foresee Swell equating an “old sound” with the quintessential jazz imperative of having an individual or distinctive sound.

Perhaps Swell did not foresee it either. Though he uttered the adjective, thus placing it on the conversational table, he may not have worked out a systematic theory of what constitutes an “old” sound. He mentions having written “something down once” and then talks about the rough edge of Jenkins’ tone, but I never ascertained what exactly he wrote. “Old” as a laudatory timbral adjective may not have been a fixed idea in Swell’s mind before our conversation on the afternoon of 15 September 2009. Leroy Jenkins and “old sounds” only came up because we had been talking about a two-page Walt Whitman

essay that inspires him. But Whitman mentions “the Oriental, the Greek, and what there is of the Roman—the oldest myths—the interminable ballad-romances of the Middle Ages” so perhaps Whitman’s diction and rhetoric planted the seeds in Swell’s mind. Whatever the nature of its inception, I decided to press him on the point, to pick out a word – “old” – that seemed interesting to me. In doing so, I may have inflated its significance.

If I posit that Steve and I shaped the concept of an “old sound” in collaboration, I am not bragging, for I don’t think we got very far with it. When he seemed to reach the limit of words’ ability to get at this affect of the mature, the magisterial, the ancient, Swell turned to an axiom of his trade. He (re)affirmed the aesthetics and ethics jazz musicians have created and refined over decades: an aesthetics of individual expression and an ethics of anti-commercialism, or vice versa. When Swell says (more than once) that he is trying to get some the essence of Jenkins’ sound into his playing he means he is trying to achieve an “old sound” *of his own*, not mimic Jenkins’ “old sound.”

Was “old” merely an empty adjective, a word Swell tossed out for the sake of rhetorical style rather than for semantic substance? Was his conflation of “old sound” with a “unique,” “personal” sound just a conversational move he made out of convenience, i.e., did the trope of a distinctive musical voice only serve as a safeguard against being caught unable to substantiate his analytic-poetic talk in an interview situation? Perhaps, but there is more to the story of *oldness*, Leroy Jenkins, and our conversation. Swell was perfectly capable of describing what he valued about the timbre of Jenkins’ viola: he called attention to its “rough edge” and also employed a comparison

(the “burry” sound of iconic free-jazz trombonist Roswell Rudd) to effectively illustrate his point to someone who would be familiar with the reference. “Old” is not *only* the “rough edge” or “burry” quality of these musicians’ characteristic sounds – if that were all that mattered to Swell he would probably have just mentioned the “rough” or “burry” timbre he liked. “Old” is what Swell makes of that timbral ideal. “Old” is the affective product of Swell’s listening-interpreting act. Hearing the “rough” timbre, he links it to all he knows about the sonic/musical parameters of avant-garde jazz and “creative music” subgenres. He identifies “roughness” as a stylistic hallmark of those subgenres and, as a practitioner of them, registers his own affinity for it. He then subtly modulates his interpretation of Jenkins’ tone by juxtaposing discourses of “personality” and “a unique sound” with an affective texture of age, posterity and universalism that Walt Whitman’s words have helped to form in his sonic-aesthetic imaginary.

A few months later, Steve and I had an opportunity to do further work on our mutual understanding of how he hears and experiences timbral rough edges as “old.” Our return to the theme was serendipitous. Steve had been talking about his perception of the difference between musicians whose “out” playing came from long and dedicated studies of the jazz avant-garde and musicians whom he considered dilettante avant-jazz players, whose primary training was in the post-bop mainstream and who essentially “faked it” when they played “out.” This led Steve to recall the first time he heard trombonist Roswell Rudd, and the affective impact that moment of listening had on him.

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SS: You listen to a Roswell Rudd, and—at 15 I heard him, first time—and you just take it all on as just a *wall* of sound and experience coming out of those records, and you're like, "Wow!" But it took me a long time to get to the real minutiae of the sound and what he was doing physically, and of course *why* he was doing it. The context of the time was very important, you know, all these things—

MS: —So what's the 'why'? What was the 'why'?

SS: The 'why', at that time?...I mean, it was the 1960s. Those guys, being with Bill Dixon—Bill Dixon gathered all these people: the Roswell Rudds, the Archie Shepps and had the Jazz Composers Guild. These guys met weekly, daily, monthly...they were out there just lookin' for gigs. And he [Dixon] brought them all together, and formed really the first do-it-yourself kind of grassroots organization. And there was a need for that. And it helped launch a lot of those guys' careers.

MS: You said why Roswell would be playing the way he was...

SS: It was the *time*. It was what was in the air. It was the *politics*...it was, you know, *all* the stuff. I wasn't *there*, I was a kid. But all that stuff, some of it started with those guys.

Swell ambiguously shuttles between chronological moments: 1970, when he first heard Roswell Rudd on the radio; the early 1960s, when Bill Dixon, Rudd, and the other musicians he mentions were organizing in the way he describes; 2009, the current moment in which he is interpreting the jazz avant-garde as an expressive form reflective of a climate of social and political unrest; and possibly many other moments in Swell's past when he developed his interpretation of how the jazz avant-garde related to '60s countercultures and the Civil Rights movement. I feel that Steve and I are headed towards a shared moment of listening "thick" with feeling and memories he has built up over years, but I want to make sure we don't veer off this path. I ask him if he can think of a Rudd recording that he played again and again, that enthralled him.

SS: The first was *Live in San Francisco*, Archie Shepp. That was really the first recording I heard of him[...]You gotta realize, it was the Eisenhower administration . . after World War 2, it was *extremely* uptight. Then all of a

sudden, black music got a little bit more into the white mainstream. You got Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry. And the jazz guys were revolting against their *own* thing. So it was all in the air, it was all social upheaval. There was a real *switch*. You know, for all our . . . free thinking and whatever we're doing today, I mean it's largely in part due to that time. Now I wasn't—I was *alive* but I wasn't a mature teenager even at that time. So those guys know more. I mean, it was *in the air* for them. It was the logical next step for all those guys to do that, for Roswell to play the way he played.

MS: So what was that experience like? Can you remember?—

SS: —*Hearing* that? Oh, absolutely, man. And I've said this before in other interviews. It was like—I'd already been playing the trombone as a kid since I was 10 years old. I heard that when I was 15 and I said, 'Oh, *this* is what you can do with an instr[ument]'—I mean all of a sudden it became *personal*. Hearing him play the way he was playing, it was *so* personal, *so* original. I finally said, 'Okay, I'm just a kid, playing scales and stuff—*now*. *Now* I can make, I know how to make *music* with this thing.' You know it went from being a shy kid in a band in the sixth grade to, like, 'Oh I can make *music* with this thing. I can *try* different things.'

MS: In other interviews, have you talked about . . . in general or in passing . . . that *progression*. The progression from . . . I would call it 'hearing *into*' his playing, like where you can begin to focus in and hear these cracked notes, details, like, minutiae. Have you spoken about that? Is there somewhere I could . . .

SS: No, I uh . . . no, that's a good question.²⁰

MS: Can you remember that?

SS: Oh, *yeah yeah yeah*. I think when I first heard it, it was just absolutely *so* . . . outrageous and *so different* from anything I'd ever heard before. And I was listening to a lot of jazz on the radio...it was just *so* . . . *completely* different and *so* . . . it was freeing. Because I'm there, and I'm working on my scales . . . —and I do this now when I teach: I want the kids to be able to *play* the notes and *play* a scale, but I also want you to have a feeling of saying, you know, '*Fuck it!* I'm just gonna do—I'm just gonna go *reach* for a note, I'm gonna make some kind of effect on the trombone, or whatever. Just to *find* something for yourself and develop it. And, uh . . . Roswell sorta gave me permission to be *free*. On the *instrument*. And from there, you know, there's a couple little riffs I still use sometimes. He does this thing where he used to go . . . rip what they call against the grain, where you just rip up to a high note . . . and then just hold it and then kinda just *slide* it up a little bit. I

²⁰ For examples of interviews where Swell mentions the impact of hearing Roswell Rudd in 1970, see (Collins 2004; plwn 2010). These interviews prove that Swell has indeed made his initial encounter with Rudd's music a centerpiece of his collection of listening experiences, though Swell does not go into as much autobiographical detail as he did during our conversation.

kinda got my own little take on it. But that's *right*, right from him. I wanna show you something that's interesting.

Swell disappears into another room in his apartment and returns with a rectangular book.

It is *Jazz Styles & Analysis* (Baker 1973), a book of trombone solos transcribed from recordings by David Baker, the trombonist and respected music educator. Steve places the book on the coffee table in between us and begins to flip through the pages until he reaches a transcription of a Roswell Rudd solo from the *Live in San Francisco* album (Shepp 1998:track 5).

SS: Here's a Roswell Rudd solo that he transcribed. I *mean* [laughs] just *looking* at it, it's . it's. *insanity*.

MS: ...looking at this, how do you feel about this, as an endeavor? As supposed to someone like J.J. [Johnson]? Do you feel like, is this something to *learn from*, or . .

SS: Oh yeah! I mean, absolutely.

MS: I mean the *visual* medium.

SS: Yeah, yeah. You know, I *knew* he wasn't playing . *notes* like J.J. Johnson would play. I knew that. So that just, when I first saw *that* [Baker's transcription] that, you know, it never occurred to me that I'd have to figure out . what Roswell is playing on all these notes right here [points to portions of the transcription where Baker uses squiggly lines to trace the approximate melodic contours of Rudd's phrases, to indicate that Rudd's defies representation in traditional notation]. 'Cause I *knew* it would look like this. Seeing this only confirmed what I thought [MS laughs] and I thought, '*That* is just *fuckin'* great!'

I ask Steve follow-up questions. Once again, I feel we have hit a groove and I want to keep it going. He begins to describe the memory of hearing Rudd on the radio.

SS: ...when I heard this, and he came out with his first note . . it was stark. He was there all by himself out in . in space and there wasn't all this– Beaver Harris was playing a nice kind of quiet rhythm. But it was still so strangely . . something else. And it was out there and stark. And it was just like he was waay out on a limb doing this. And that's what the amazing thing was to me about it. 'Wow! He just went . [combination of saying "whew" and mimicking sound of wind] He just picked it out! He opened up a whole 'nother door[...] He just shot it right out there, and it was like . opening a window and jumping out and you could fly.

Swell's shift to metaphor in his description/narration gives me the sense that we have moved to a more intimate realm of conversation – the realm of emotion.²¹ I relate a similar experience upon first hearing Miles Davis' 1966 recording of "Footprints." I tell Steve how I was baffled by the metric modulation that drummer Tony Williams initiates partway through Davis' solo, shifting from a medium-tempo triple 6/4 to a much faster 4/4 that, for months, struck me as unrelated until I was able to discern the ways that Williams achieved the dramatic metric shift through virtuosic use of rhythmic subdivisions.²² This was a moment in which I experienced the contrasting feelings of total confusion and exhilaration, in which a move "outside" struck me as strange yet captivating.

I finally ask Steve if we can listen to the recording. He finds "Wherever June Bugs Go" on his computer and plays the track through his stereo speakers. As we listen to the opening phrases of Rudd's solo, Swell says, "I mean that's . that's the stuff that's going right out the window. I mean he's playing in time and he's playing melodically, too, you know?" A few moments later, in reaction to Rudd's playing a loud, raucous descending melody, Swell exclaims, "I mean something like that where he goes [mimes Rudd's descending gliss]; I mean he's just *throwin'* it out there . and *catching* it, you know?"

²¹ I'm thinking here of ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology that attends to the affective intensity that becomes concentrated in metaphor and figurative tropes that circulate within music scenes (e.g., Feld 1982; Fox 2004; Gray 2013; Meintjes 2003).

²² The reader who is curious to hear the musical event I'm talking about can refer to "Footprints" on (Davis 1967). Williams' metric modulation during Davis' solo occurs at about 2:19 into the track. While my 17-year-old self heard a confounding musical non sequitur, I now hear Williams foreshadowing this metric modulation through the polyrhythms he intermittently superimposes on the basic 6/4 right from the beginning of the take.

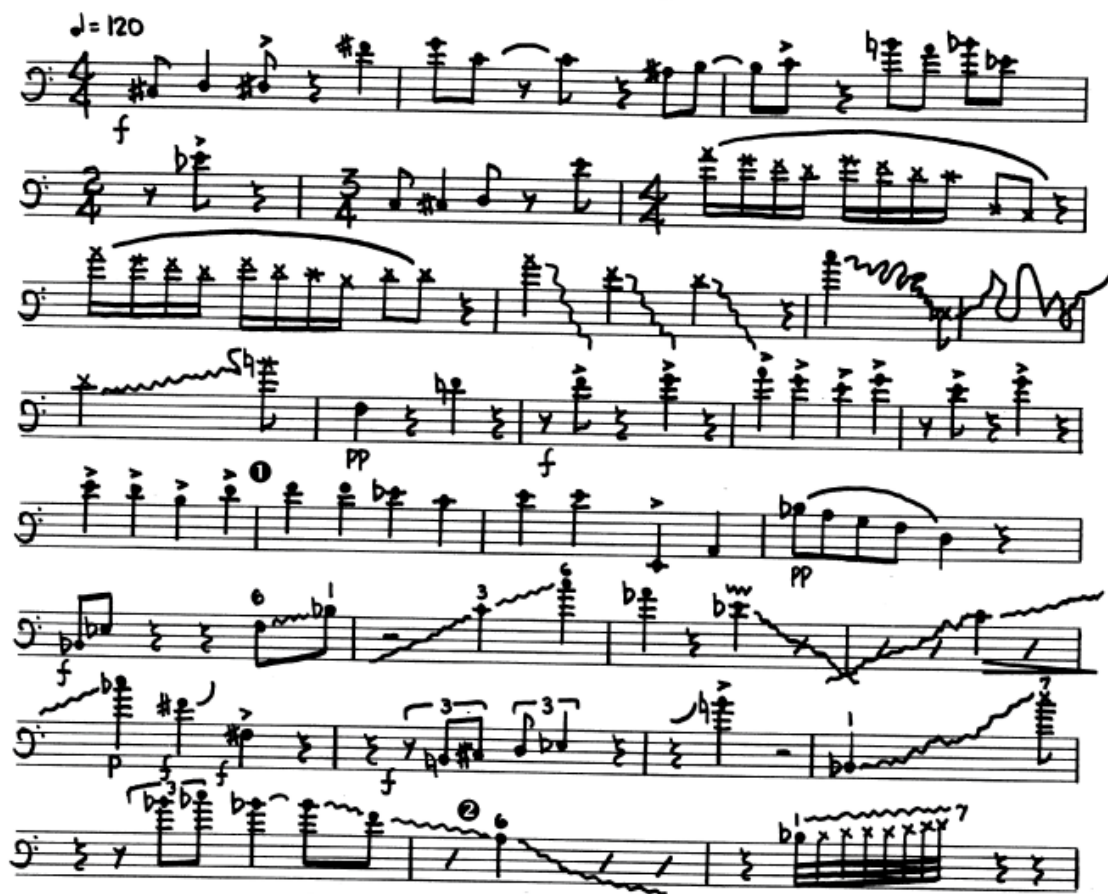


Figure 14. Opening of Roswell Rudd's solo on "Wherever Junebugs Go"
Transcription reproduced from Baker (1973).

- ① [5th system, 2nd measure] "I mean that's . that's the stuff that' going right out the window. I mean he's playing in time and he's playing melodically, too, you know?"
- ② [8th system, 2nd measure] "I mean something like that where he goes [mimes Rudd's descending gliss]; I mean he's just *throwin'* it out there . and *catching* it, you know?"

In Figure 14, I use David Baker's transcription of the Rudd solo to illustrate when Swell makes the above remarks. I have indicated the moments with the numbers "1" and "2." After Steve makes these remarks, I ask him to pause the recording and tell me more about what he hears, since the music is now fresh in his mind.

SS: I can't say enough about his tone, cause when you're taught as a young musician, your tone always has to be this *other* kinda perfect, classically-oriented thing. And he was already—I mean he was coming from a Dixieland background. So he had that big, burry kinda sound and it just translates so beautifully into this music.

MS: Yeah, I remember last time...you were talking about having a... like an 'old' sound

SS: Oh, yeah yeah yeah yeah, *that's* it, right there. *That's* it.

MS: And you mentioned Leroy Jenkins, too.

SS: Yesss, Leroy too. I mean It's just an *old*, soulful feeling—

MS: Soulful, yeah yeah yeah.

We shift back to Rudd and continue the work of bringing Swell's aural experience into our conversation.

SS: That was my first time...*hearing music*, really. I mean *really* hearing it. I mean, the first time music was *personal* for me.

MS: Could you get a little more into what do you mean by 'personal'? I *think* I know what you mean, but I just wanna...

SS: I think, just remembering how I was as a 15-year-old kid. I was very shy, umm . . . I wasn't good with girls, I had bad skin, I had acne really bad. You know, I was very inside myself. And this was the first time, listening to this record . . . something popped in me. You know, life—I didn't say it at the time, but—life, things you can do, being pro-active rather than a passive experiencer of things. All that came into play and I couldn't verbalize that *then*, but I knew *something* was happening.

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I can add a bit more biographical information to further elucidate Swell's thoughts on why he felt such a strong connection with Rudd's music. Swell was raised in a Jewish household in suburban New Jersey during the 1950s and 1960s (incidentally, he was born in 1954, the same year as Patrick Brennan). He remarked that his father had very "square" taste in music and humorously recalled his father pulling him away from the television

when the first Beatles appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the 1960s. “He pulled me into another room and put on Tommy Dorsey!!” Steve said in between laughs. “He was really worried that they [the Beatles] were gonna corrupt us!” As Steve noted several times during this and other conversations, he was too young during the mid-60s to fully appreciate the complexity of the socio-political climate in the United States, but he figures himself as an immediate heir to the 1960s zeitgeist when he narrates how avant-garde jazz played a crucial role in his processes of coming of age, realizing what his values and ambitions were, and discovering a depth and variety in music that were previously unknown to him.

After Swell and I discussed and listened to Rudd’s playing on “Wherever Junebugs Go,” I felt I had a better sense of why the “rough edges” and “oldness” of both Rudd’s and Jenkins’ sounds were pleasurable and meaningful to him. He heard something of *himself*, or perhaps of the “self” he wished to *become*, in Rudd’s burry, raucous post-Dixieland way of playing the trombone.²³ Swell’s explanations of the historical moment of the jazz avant-garde emergence indicated admiration; it was a musical history in which he wanted to partake. As he continued to learn about and practice jazz, and particularly as he focused his efforts in the direction of the avant-garde, he came to feel it was a musical style with an ethos that felt “natural” or “right” to him. Rudd’s trombone touched Swell because it modeled a kind of expression that he recognized within himself. But, part of his

²³ Tia DeNora has written about the ways that listeners use recordings of music as a “technology of self” (DeNora 2000:46–74). I find her term useful, but her investigation centers on a collection of individuals who presumably have no social relation to one another. I am concerned with how Steve Swell’s attraction to music led him to think about how to situate the self he wished to become within a social formation.

coming to appreciate more deeply this “old, soulful sound” involved the realization that he could be a part of something beyond himself, a musical tradition bigger and *older* than himself.

Both Brennan and Swell represent examples of how the tropes of “hipness” and “cool” attached to jazz music (as I discuss in Chapter 1) can be consumed by white individuals who then work upon and reshape those tropes through their own musical and social practices. In both their cases, encounters with jazz inspired them to cultivate an appreciation of African American expressive culture and to develop a critical awareness of the structures of racism that continue to hold sway in U.S. culture and political-economic life.

5.5 In the Mainstream of the Margins

I described Steve Swell as a musician who had found a stable place *within* the Vision Fest roster. To conclude this chapter, I turn to a musician who occupies a position closer to the subcultural “center” of the AFA circle of musicians: Matthew Shipp. Shipp’s cultural capital within the art world of AFA is multiply determined. He was a member of the David S. Ware Quartet (until Ware’s death in 2012), a group that achieved enough popularity (within the commercial context of jazz) to briefly record for Columbia Records during the late 1990s. The Ware Quartet was a perennial centerpiece of the Vision Festival. Shipp has a long history of collaborating with William Parker (husband of AFA director Patricia Nicholson Parker), both within the context of the Ware Quartet and many of Shipp’s own projects.

During one of our interviews, Shipp and I discussed our mutual admiration for the pianist Bill Evans. Shipp remarked that for him the “first” Bill Evans Trio, which existed from 1959 to 1961, “encompasses as much freedom as anything else has, like if you talk about the extremes of Cecil Taylor being, you know, free jazz...that Bill Evans trio still encompasses as much freedom as anybody had in any situation. So therefore, it was a real phenomenon of that period of the music, of that early ‘60s [moment]...” Shipp said he thought of Evans’ stylistic innovations alongside those of Paul Bley, Jaki Byard, Herbie Hancock, Andrew Hill, McCoy Tyner and other pianists who forged new musical directions in jazz during the ‘60s.

It immediately struck me that, discursively, Shipp placed Evans *within* an avant-garde or experimental tradition in jazz. He expounded upon this argument: “...a lot of people hear the wrong things, so they can get the wrong impression about him. Like, first of all, if you hear the abstract beauty that exists in that trio with Paul Motian, there’s *no way* you can think of him as a cocktail pianist [laughs].” Shipp is talking about Evans’ stylistic choice to remain within the limits of tonality and explicitly-defined meter throughout his career. He is positing a hypothetical uninformed listener who only hears Evans’ harmonic vocabulary and his choice of material (mostly Tin Pan Alley songs and later popular songs) and does not hear the innovations in group interplay and flexibility that Evans achieved in his first trio with bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian.

I thought that by focusing on Bill Evans, a specific figure in jazz history, Shipp and I could delve into the kind of detailed discussions of sound that I engaged in with Patrick Brennan and Steve Swell. As we continued our conversation, digressing and then

returning to the topic of Bill Evans, Shipp used primarily metaphoric language in discussing musical sound. I felt as though he was constantly blocking my attempts to get into the nitty-gritty of musical style and nuances of sound. Toward the end of this meeting, Shipp explained:

To me, listening *should* be kind of a non-cerebral process where you know what works for you, when you process the information and it has an effect on you. But I actually find—for your purposes, you wanna *write* something about listening. For my purposes, I don't really wanna *know* even why I listen, I just wanna go with it. I don't wanna know why I listen to anything or why I like it at this point in my life. Because I'm not dealing in an analytical headspace, because I'm where I wanna be.

Shipp claims that he no longer listens from an “analytical headspace” because he feels satisfied with the level of technical mastery he has achieved; therefore, when he listens to music he does not try to *analyze* in the literal sense, to separate the whole of musical sound into parts such as “melody,” “rhythm,” “chord progression,” and the like. While his comments bear a striking resemblance to those of John Rogers, the stakes were somewhat different in Shipp's case. I had no doubts that Shipp both heard with more than enough acuity and possessed the vocabulary to speak with precision about his aural experience. He was opposed to talking about musical detail on aesthetic-ideological grounds, and as an iconic figure of the LES scene and central player in the Vision Fest roster.

I came to see Shipp's resistance to parsing out details of aural perception and interpretation as emblematic of the ethos that dominates within the LES scene: an ethos that celebrates the power of music to defy analysis and explanation. Consider the conversations I held with Steve Swell: though he was quite willing to talk about timbre and the emotional effects music had upon him, he rarely spoke about chords and

rhythms. When he showed me a transcription of a free jazz solo, he did so to delight in how the musical sound *refused* to cooperate with the strictures of Western notation. Many participants in the LES scene who possess knowledge of music theory tend to stay away from musical “shop talk” because for them such talk is antithetical to the genre of avant-jazz. John Rogers’ implicit admonition in his claim that he listens to “everything all at once” may have been informed by his diligent participation in the LES scene. While mainstream musicians might talk about preferred chord substitutions and effective ways of employing cross-rhythms to create musical tension (for example), in my experience LES scene musicians tended to stay away from overt discussions of such systematic approaches to musical organization because they wished to preserve, both for listeners *and, I argue, for themselves*, the “magic” and mystery of avant-jazz. Matthew Shipp, and to a lesser degree, Steve Swell did not want to break down their aural perception because they did not believe the inquiry would lead to a deeper understanding of what makes “this music” so powerful.

Conclusion

The Religiosity of Avant-jazz and the 1960s as Limit Experience

Matthew Shipp and I sit in a café on 2nd Avenue and East 5th Street. I have been asking him about some of his more memorable listening experiences.

Shipp: I used to actually keep a journal sometimes of certain images certain musics would evoke in me.

Somoroff: Oh, yeah. Visual images?

Shipp. Right.

Somoroff: Yeah, for me...[*laughs*] some of the best listening I've done is for these *two-second* moments when I sometimes [Shipp: yeah]...I will have put music on and I'll fall asleep—

Shipp: [*excitedly, interrupting*] So yeah, that's the – I was getting ready to say, the pre-sleep – you know, you put something on and you kinda lie down and you kind of fall...You know, that's the *real*, that's where the *real* images the *real* listening...that's where the *real* epiphanies come.

Somoroff: Yeah, can you—

Shipp: --I have *hundreds* of those episodes.

Somoroff: Can you describe *one* of them, or is there any one that sticks in your mind?

Shipp: Yeah, yeah! There was actually—

Somoroff: I mean I realize that's kind of personal...

Shipp: Yeah, there was one instance; I was listening to Sun Ra once – and my parents weren't home, the bathroom was right next to my bedroom, so I had it on really loud and I was home alone. And I was taking a bath, actually, and I was lying back. And Sun Ra comes on and he's playing this massive organ thing. And I fell half asleep in the bathtub and at one second I had this image of...where Sun Ra and [Anton] Webern intersected. And I felt in that one second that I intuited whatever connection there is between European avant-garde and black American avant-garde; like I *GOT it*. In that instant second *I was the whole* – not owner – but whatever that intersection was, I *fully* understood it.

Somoroff: Right, right, like you touched it in a very *deep way*—

Shipp: —in that second.

Somoroff: So, was there an image at that point?

Shipp: *Yeah*. It was Sun Ra in this, like upper *room*. And Sun Ra was sitting there kinda, just like a Buddha in this upper room. And then Webern was there, and he almost interse—he *came across*. And there was an intersection of a vertical and a horizontal thing...And it was just like something *clicked* in my head and I was just like [*makes facial expression of awe*]

Somoroff: Yeah...that's great. No, I'm glad we touched on that because...people often talk about like, "Oh I used to go to bed listening to stuff" but I always...I don't think that's something I've ever talked to someone else about—

Shipp: Have you seen Ben Ratliff's book on Coltrane?

Somoroff: No, I haven't. I've heard about it.

Shipp: Well, actually look for it and look my name up in the index. And there's a quote from me in there about listening to Coltrane, and read that, cause *that's* another one.

Somoroff: Okay, cool.

...it's obvious to me what Coltrane was about. Once he got past jazz, he was trying to delve into some subconscious pool of language. When I was a teenager, there were times when I'd be totally into a certain Coltrane album for a while, and I'd listen to it over and over. Sometimes I'd be lying on my bed and falling asleep, and I remember hearing his playing, while I was in a semi-sleep state, decoded into some kind of words. (Matthew Shipp, quoted in Ratliff 2007:162)

During another one of many westward walks Steve, Yuko, and I took along Houston Street, Yuko and I somehow got onto the topic of listening to music on the verge of sleep. I suddenly recalled that I had discussed the topic of "pre-sleep" listening some with Shipp, and recounted some of my feelings of hearing music with greater acuity at those times. Yuko leaned towards me with excitement and said she had long believed that one of the *best* ways to listen to music is when one is tired. She believed that in a fatigued

state, the rational operations of one's mind – the mechanisms of judging and labeling – were far less active. In dozing states, Yuko had perceived music without the distortive filter of her ego. She strongly believe that egoistic thinking presented a major barrier to this kind of *deeper* hearing.

On yet another occasion, an LES scene member recalled a heightened aural experience that occurred in the *hypnagogic state*, the penumbral region of consciousness between waking and sleep.¹ Barbara Burch narrated her “breakthrough” moment with avant-jazz, the moment in which the music *spoke* to her, in which it no longer sounded strange and undifferentiated:

One day, I went to see William Parker's [band] In Order to Survive at Context [*a defunct music club*]...and I fell asleep, you know, it was hot in there...I kind of fell asleep. I felt kind of mortified when I woke up. But I just kind of dozed off a little bit, and what used to happen after these gigs is that my friend would come up to me and say, “What did you think?!” And I'd say, [*mimes perplexed facial expression*] “Whatever...I dunno...”

[...] And so this one day we went to see In Order to Survive and I, I'd *just barely* dozed off. And he said, “Whatdidyouthink?” And I looked at him and I went “*That was amazing*” and it *was*. It was *totally* amazing. And then I just got really into it. And then we were *both* totally surprised, I was really surprised that came out of my mouth. Our theory is, that when people go to hear this music they *try* to understand it, and my act of falling asleep – cause I could still hear it – is really what it takes to *truly* appreciate the music, cause you just have to let go. You have to *not* try to understand it, you just have to let go. And it's that thing about deep listening...you know, listening with your eyes closed is completely different than listening with them open. And I think in this music that kind of thing is even more pronounced.

After Barbara shared this recollection, I told her about my conversation with Yuko on the topic of listening while dozing off.

¹ In *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Michael Jackson theorizes the “penumbra” as a “phenomenologically indeterminate zone” in which humans might find themselves during critical moments of experience (Jackson 2009:xii, *passim*).

Listening on the verge of sleep begets more profound hearings. Shipp, Otomo, and Burch all identify a heightened, visionary type of hearing. They recall moments when they heard *beyond* their usual limits, when their minds and ears beheld a deeper, perhaps hidden, level of musical and sonic order.² But perhaps we can move beyond visual metaphors. Perhaps a word like Murray Schafer's *clairaudience* is a fitting designation for what occurs during these cherished moments of intensified aural experience.³ While Schafer defines *clairaudience* as a skilled practice bearing no connotations of the parapsychological, LES scene members' accounts of these special auditory moments are ambiguously positioned between the mundane and the mystical. Burch, Otomo, and Shipp do *not* claim to have experienced extra-sensory perception of sound, hearing sounds that are not there in a literal physical sense. They do suggest that in the hypnagogic state they have been able to hear *beyond* the empirical acoustic phenomena that they identify as music. All three listeners use language that connotes altered states of consciousness, which might be achieved through spiritual practices, practices of self focused on the mind (such as meditation), or the ingestion of psychoactive substances. They describe revelatory moments of listening, during which they were able to hear sound differently, and hence able to hear past surface acoustics to deeper truths. These truths might be revelations about the organization of musical elements (rhythm, timbre, melody, harmony), the interrelation of seemingly disparate musical styles, intensified perception of and/or empathy with the affects lying within musical process and sound.

² Note that the annual festival showcasing avant-jazz is named the "Vision Fest."

³ Schafer theorizes "*clairaudience*" as a practice or skill one cultivates. He writes, "...there is nothing mystical about it; it simply refers to exceptional hearing ability" (1994:272).

These three listeners narrate moments in which they feel they heard sounds that were already there in an empirical sense, but heard with greater acuity and sensitivity the relationships between the those sounds that comprise musical flow. They heard more clearly. Shipp only heard “whatever connection there is” between Saturnian-African American musician Sun Ra and Viennese serialist Anton von Webern while barely awake, and beheld this connection in a translucent dream-image evoked by the sonic phenomena of his Sun Ra recording. Barbara found herself praising an avant-jazz performance after a moment during which her hearing of the music was less structured by a rationalist impulse to place the sounds within taxonomies of genre, categories of style. Yuko similarly believed that the ego occluded one’s ability to hear musical sound without the mediation of rationality.

At the end of Chapter 5, I described Shipp’s reluctance to engage in music-analytic talk as representative of the dominant ethos of the LES avant-jazz scene. The three narrations of moments of clairaudience I have just reviewed are further affirmations of that ethos. Narrative tropes of transcendence and mystical experience form one major component of this ethos: a conviction about the possibility of spiritual enlightenment, and a concomitant belief that music is a privileged means for achieving such enlightenment. The “analysis” that this ethos mistrusts is an operation of vulgar atomism that fragments, reduces, and creates taxonomies. The kind of “analysis” that Barbara, Matt, and Yuko avoid is a perceptual and experiential mode in which the perceiving subject becomes more concerned with what kind of chords were played, or whether a musical performance corroborated existing discourses of genre, than with cultivating an

attitude of perceptual openness. This openness does not dictate the absence of aesthetic evaluation, since all three listeners were explicit about their belief in aesthetic criteria. This openness, rather, could be described as an experimental approach to aesthetic experience attuned to the experimental aesthetics of sound that these LES listeners hear in the jazz avant-garde tradition.

What do I mean by “an experimental approach to aesthetic experience”? My answer to this question grows from my interpretation of the LES scene’s reproduction of a language of *religiosity*. I use the word “religiosity” in the sense that Michael Jackson (2009) does: to denote a variety of experience that includes, but is not limited to, formal religious practices – an experience that defies explanation, in which one pushes oneself to one or more of several kinds of limits (of consciousness, of physical endurance, of emotional intensity, of mental concentration).⁴ In a rather literal sense, Burch and Shipp tell me conversion narratives that made no specific claims to faith in a deity. Matt Shipp talks of “the *real* epiphanies.” Yuko Otomo seeks to transcend her ego when listening to music. Barbara Burch realized that “You have to *not* try to understand it, you just have to

⁴ Jackson’s reframing of “religiosity” is worth quoting at some length: “...we need to approach religiosity without a theological vocabulary, *repudiate the notion of religion as a sui generis phenomenon*, and distance ourselves from the assumption of a necessary relationship between espoused belief and subjective experience” (2009: 99, my italics).

And later: “One is thus led to question the discursive conventions that define different modes of transgressive behavior of religious or secular, social or antisocial, positive or negative. That the impulse to run wild, violate norms, degrade oneself, squander money, take risks, lose one’s reason, reverse roles, and break habits has no obvious social value does not mean that it has no existential value, since it is by magically deconstructing the order that is imposed on us in our everyday lives that we discover our capacity for creating order for ourselves...In its most deeply existential sense, *religious experience has its origins in this impulse to destroy, renounce, or abandon the quotidian world in order to be reborn within wider fields of cosmic connectedness, natural being, or human community*” (2009: 161, my italics). Jackson places different types of limit-experiences alongside one another, including religious epiphany, altered consciousness, sexual pleasure, aesthetic pleasure granted by an expressive form such as music.

let go.” Steven Joerg placed the neologism “AUM” in the name of his record label not only to index a Charles Mingus album, but also to index “Om” – the Sanskrit word that serves as a fundamental mantra, a sonically-encoded practice of spiritual self-attunement.⁵ As we discussed our mutual disappointment in a performance we recently witnessed at the Local 269, Steve Swell said to me, “You’re probably like me and there’s a lot of people – they wanna be blown away, they want an experience, they wanna be *uplifted*, they wanna feel *alive* in some sense.”

Many scene members were reflexively aware about inheriting these tropes of transcendence from the countercultural milieu of the 1960s. Members of the LES avant-jazz scene look back upon the long 1960s (which I define as the period from roughly 1958 to 1974) as a focal point in American, and more broadly, human, social history.⁶ Consider Patrick Brennan’s observation on the era:

“The sixties is so punctuated by these deaths...I mean, if Coltrane had even lived two or three more years, what he might have done to the cultural landscape just with his choices...you know, then of course there’s Martin Luther King and Malcolm and RFK and *Hendrix*, even. ‘Cause if Hendrix had had a chance to mature, who knows what *he* would have done?! Of course every decade probably has it, but something was hot about that time!!”

Brennan’s experience of a half-remembered, half-mythologized 1960s gestalt recalls Steve Swell’s likeminded admiration of the era (see Chapter 5). Similarly, Brad Farberman declared that he prefers to hear avant-jazz played by “middle-aged black men” knowing

⁵ From a Joerg interview that appeared in the jazz press: “AUM is of course the mantra of mantras, representing “the soundless sound of the universe,” the original tone and the source of all creation. The music which comes out on AUM—all of it—displays a fidelity to this original tone. Not low fidelity or high fidelity, but AUM Fidelity” (AAJ Staff 2004).

⁶ Solis initially defines the “long 1960s” as the period from roughly 1958 to 1970 (2006:334) but ends up expanding his definition to encompass a 20-year period from 1955 to 1975. Based upon a discussion of social movements that began in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s, Simon Hall argues that the anti-hegemonic, countercultural ethos of the 1960s extended well into the 70s (Hall 2008).

that I would understand this as his recognition of the relevance of historical moment and lived experience rather than an espousal of race ideology (see Chapter 4). While we listened to an Ornette Coleman recording from 1968, Steve and Yuko remarked, somewhat furtively, that they heard a special vibrancy in the music that they rarely hear in current-day avant-jazz.

If they were young adults during the period, they fondly look back upon some of the numerous transgressions of hegemony that marked it: social movements to overturn structurally-reproduced hierarchies of race and gender, related movements in opposition of what appeared to those involved to be the U.S. government's insatiable appetite for military aggression, the extolment of drug use and pursuits of sexual pleasure as practices that were variously liberating and salubrious (and through this extolling, a rejection of the prudish, Christianity-inflected stance sensual pleasures that dominated the cultural mainstream), and crucially, the musical innovations across various music genres that enacted the projects of political resistance and social transgression in the medium of aestheticized sound. If they were too young to have either lived through or to remember the era, they consider "the 1960s" to have been a prolonged moment when something was happening, when something seemed, in Kathleen Stewart's words, to "*snap into place*."⁷

When something – recognition, realization, a feeling of collectivity, fear – snaps into

⁷ In her meditation on the affective forces at work in everyday (and not-so-everyday) life, Kathleen Stewart (2007) uses the metaphor of "things snapping into place" to evoke the phenomenological sensation of *something happening*. For instance, a "we" can snap into place when neighbors on a street come out to see the car crash they just heard. Stewart writes: "Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation" (2007: 2).

place, one experiences a heightened moment. Another way to put it is that LES scene members either recall firsthand or consume narratives of the 1960s as an extended high, a political, aesthetic, affective limit-experience that becomes more intense for being pulled taught over the span of years.

If LES scene members value penumbral moments of listening for the ways these moments enable a deeper kind of hearing, they also value avant-jazz for its capacity to facilitate penumbral experiences. The language of religiosity that flows through the discursive networks of the scene points to how many scene participants consider “the perfect listening experience” (to recall Steve Holtje’s phrase) to be a *limit-experience*, “a critical situation[s] in life where we come up against the limits of language, the limits of our strength, the limits of our knowledge, yet are sometimes thrown open to new ways of understanding our being-in-the-world, new ways of connecting with others” (Jackson 2009:xii).

From “Nostalgia” to “Vigilance”

During and after fieldwork, I found myself diagnosing the LES scene with a case of incurable nostalgia. Symptoms included: a shared preoccupation with the accomplishments of deceased luminaries such as John Coltrane and Albert Ayler; the recollections of defunct venues like the “Old” Knitting Factory and Tonic; regret at the disappearance of a more human, if rougher, Lower East Side; and, chiefly, the choice of many musicians to continue working in an idiom forged over 40 years ago, by the likes of Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane.

I still believe that participants in the LES scene share a sense that the 1960s zeitgeist contained within it a potential, a *something* (Stewart 2007) that has since been regrettably lost or significantly subdued in American popular consciousness since the various disillusionments that marked the early- to mid-70s. For them, something snapped into place for a while there in the 1960s, but then snapped slightly out of place (or way out of place). But still, “nostalgia” has never felt quite right. Etymologically, “nostalgia” is built of the Greek roots “nostos,” meaning “a return home,” and “algia,” meaning “pain” or “suffering.” In its most literal sense, nostalgia names homesickness. Pathology lies at the base of this word, and most scholarship on the concept of “nostalgia,” defined more broadly to include various forms of wistful feeling for a past condition that may or may not have existed, bear out the word’s foundations in notions of ill-being.

Yet it seems incongruous to me to find something “pathological” in practices of looking and listening back, with great fondness, to a period in the not-so-distant past of U.S. history when people were optimistic about the potential for musical exploration and experimentation to effect social change. A shared sense of this potential, loosely defined, across several music scenes and cultures – the avant-garde jazz, psychedelic rock, and soul scenes, the multi-generic music scenes in Chicago, Memphis, New York, and San Francisco – was part of the “something” that snapped into place during the 1960s. I also don’t see anything pathological in wanting to *maintain* a version of that optimism and cultivate it through the continuation and sometimes the extension of the musical experiments and innovations that emerged in jazz scenes during the 1960s and 1970s.

On January 13 2014, Patricia Nicholson Parker sent a message to the AFA email

list giving information on the funerary services to be held for Roy Campbell, Jr. and

Amiri Baraka. Remarking on Roy Campbell, she wrote:

Roy Campbell was a warrior and hero in our New York City music community. He carried his armament (the trumpet, flugelhorn, flutes) wherever he went, and he went wherever he was needed. He was for the music, he was for his brothers and sisters. He was concerned about the next generation. But he didn't want his peers to be forgotten. He didn't want the History [*sic*] of this music, which was born out of struggle, to be forgotten. His music was not born in a university, but came from the struggle that he endured every day as a black man and as a human being trying to rise up and raise up.

The rhetoric is hyperbolic. I grew familiar with this discourse during fieldwork: the theme of constant struggle, amplified by the metaphor of “warrior;” the talk about “this music” and “the next generation” conveying very intensely felt and emphatically uttered senses of *tradition* and *solidarity*; the righteous overtones in the phrase “rise up and raise up” and in the observation that “this music” came from “struggle” and implicitly from the ghetto streets of socioeconomically-marginalized, ethnic minorities. I’ve kept an eye on the LES scene for four years, and I look at some of the metaphors and phrases Nicholson Parker uses and see something akin to avant-jazz boilerplate.

But then I realize that I am indulging in cynicism. Paul Rabinow writes that the ethnographer is always more “observer” than “participant” (Rabinow 1977: 79). Cynicism is easy for an observer. I take a step back, remember that in principle I agree with everything that Nicholson Parker and other scene members say that the music and the scene represent. I also believe in egalitarianism and want to live in a polity that provides for all its citizens according to their needs.

I would like to think that music has the ability to change the consciousness of both practitioners and listeners, and thereby activate positive change in the material conditions

of a society. In many cases (my own included), participation in music, either through playing or listening, has effected changes in social and/or political consciousness.⁸ How, then, to describe this *retroauditive* tendency I observed, this constant interaction with and listening to a sonic past? It occurred to me slowly, over the course of months, as I noticed a series of words, phrases, and tropes connoting vision (paradoxically), alertness, strength.

Feld delineates “witnessing” a phenomenon from merely “viewing” it: when one witnesses, one partakes in and is moved by a phenomenon. In viewing, one maintains a conceptual and emotional distance (Feld 1982: 234). Jeff Schlanger’s long-term pictographic project *cum alter ego*, MusicWitness®, employs “witness” in a similar sense. According to Schlanger, he does not merely observe or hear avant-jazz in an objective sense, he feels with the musicians. The Vision Festival is so named to conjure up associations of “forward” thinking, of a coalescing of progressive politics and innovative aesthetics.⁹ A “visionary” is someone who looks to the future, who brims over with new ideas, but also someone who has the gift of second sight, a clairvoyant, or *clairaudient*.

I reflected upon the performance by Dalachinsky and Basscentric (discussed in Chapter 3). While I was mulling over Michael Bisio’s rendition of the tune “Alabama”

⁸ Among the countless examples that I could cite, the remarks of two ethnomusicologists who have both been deeply touched by African American musical styles seem particularly relevant here. In the opening “Dialogue” of *Music Grooves*, Charles Keil and Steven Feld discuss the ways that their encounter with and eventual participation in black music styles catalyzed their political convictions and social consciousness (Keil and Feld 2005).

⁹ Along these lines, note that the tagline posted at the top of the AUM Fidelity homepage reads: “AUM Fidelity is a recording label & action concern long devoted to procreative sound and song, perpetually producing vanguard album works with eternal masters of music since 1997, with select excursions elsewhere. The principal focus has always been on premier jazz & avant-garde soul music.”

and Dalachinsky's reading of his Coltrane poem, the title of a Coltrane tune suddenly popped into my mind as being the appropriate word to describe both *that specific performative moment* and the broader stance taken by the LES: *vigilance*. In 1965, Coltrane recorded a performance he titled "Vigil" (see Coltrane 1967). This occurred during Coltrane's "late period," when his music-stylistic embrace of the emergent jazz avant-garde (or New Thing, or New Black Music) was plainly obvious in sound. With the change in musical sound came a shift in discourse: titles connoting the spiritual, religious, or mystical – which had previously appeared in his work – became dominant. The title "Vigil" fit in with others, such as "Selflessness," "Ascent," or "To Be."

The modern English usage of "vigil," denoting an act, derives from the Latin "vigil," meaning "awake" or "alert." The Latin word in turn is a transformation of an older proto-Indo-European root "weg," which is translated as "to be strong." Judeo-Christian senses of the word "vigil" include rituals of observance, of keeping awake the night before a holy day (OED Online 2014).

One is afflicted with nostalgia, but one *holds* a vigil. Nostalgia is a condition one suffers or sustains. A vigil is a purposive action.

Members of the LES scene carry on a vigil for "this music." In myriad ways, they remain devoted to the tradition of avant-jazz. They practice this devotion by making musical sound, painting, writing, dancing, filming, recording, and, always, by listening. They listen because, for them, this music is real. In avant-jazz they hear the history of a marginalized neighborhood, as well as a sonically-encoded model of egalitarian social relations. Avant-jazz is part of the great tradition of jazz, of African American music. At

its best, it is spiritual enlightenment made audible. It's an expressive form defined by its commitment to aesthetic integrity and its resistance to facile commercial appeal.

The LES avant-jazz scene listens to its ancestors as it pushes ahead, in sound, to the future. On one hand, the limit-experience of the 1960s resonates through the scene, while avant-jazz musicians seek to re-sound the contours of that experience, to help that *something* to snap back into place. On the other hand, the LES scene hears avant-jazz as an ongoing reverberation that *began* in the 1960s. They perform, listen to, and document avant-jazz in order to maintain this reverberation, while they also work at amplifying it.

Dr. Feelgood, or, How Can We Learn to Stop Worrying about the Jazz Avant-Garde?

The big question about the 60s and 70s avant-garde is clearly: what was the impact of this music? One is justified in asking: is there a disconnection between the music's place in people's listening habits (then and now) and the place the music has in the historical literature? *We love to write about it, but who listens to it?* Additionally, one has to ask: did or does avant-garde jazz have some other kind of broad or even narrow impact on jazz at large, beyond the cultivation of a mass audience? (Solis 2006:332, my italics)

In much of jazz historiography, "transcendence" has been adopted as a central subject position through which the individual musician utilizes musical expression to move into a higher state of being. The link to transcendence in jazz stems from a complex amalgamation of elements from Western philosophy, Christian spirituality, and the suffering of African Americans under slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy. Constructing the subject utilizing transcendence is therefore reflective of a politics of African American identity not easily applicable outside the United States. (McCormack 2012:1)

Read together, the two quotations above gesture towards an understanding of jazz scholarship's apparent preoccupation with the avant-garde that emerged during the

1960s. Gabriel Solis points to the preoccupation, while Ryan McCormack's critique of "transcendence" as a master narrative in jazz historiography offers a partial explanation of it. In the heading of this section, I reference the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* because of the ways the film serves as a compendium of U.S. Cold War anxieties. *Strangelove* is a satire of the Cold War condition, a worst-case scenario of the endgame of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The film appeared after, and comments on, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, during which a nuclear confrontation between the US and the USSR seemed imminent. By 1964, the US had dramatically increased its involvement in the ongoing political conflicts between North and South Vietnam. *Strangelove* remains a crucial cultural text through which to interpret the antiwar movement that became a keystone of the countercultural milieu of the 1960s.

I have just offered a synthesis of my interpretations of the listening practices of the LES avant-jazz scene. Now, I offer some final reflections on the place of the present work in the fields of jazz studies, ethnomusicology, and the ethnography of listening. An overlapping set of interests and questions inspired me to begin formulating what has become this project. Most importantly, within the field of jazz studies I wanted to contribute to a growing literature that turns to questions of reception, historicity, and affective experience, instead of the focus on formal analyses of musical style that has overwhelmingly dominated jazz criticism and represented a failsafe mode of scholarship up through the early 2000s. Relatedly, by focusing upon *listeners* (whether or not they are also musicians), I also sought a strategy for reconfiguring the questions music analysis

seeks to answer, especially in the case of jazz – a genre whose participants are so attuned to and invested in tropes of “listening.” I placed “socially and historically situated” listeners (Feld 1984) at the center of my fieldwork in order to develop an approach to music analysis grounded in the phenomenological actualities of listening. Put another way, I wanted to figure out a way to analyze musical sound that was informed by the way positioned subjects “in the world” hear music. As I noted in the Introduction, several jazz ethnographers have investigated the phenomenological dimensions of jazz musicians’ aural experience (Berliner 1994; Jackson 2012; Monson 1996; Solis 2008). This scholarship laid important groundwork upon which my “listener-centric” study could build.

I also thought it important to do jazz research that acknowledged the centrality of sound recordings in the auditory lives of jazz participants, without reiterating the often-moralizing critiques of consumerism and commodity fetishism that grow out of the Marxist tradition of social theory (e.g., Adorno 1991; Baudrillard 2001). Again, I decided that a focus on the practices of “real-life” jazz listeners offered a means of balancing critical awareness of the ways commodities shape social reality with an equally critical attention to the vibrancy of commodities in lived experience.

During fieldwork, and particularly afterward, as I began to write my dissertation, I came to see an irony in my “finding” the LES scene and deciding to limit my inquiry of jazz listenership to what I perceived to be its networks. What were the chances of my focusing upon a jazz scene on which a minimum of four other ethnomusicologists were also working (Barzel 2012; Currie 2009; Greenland 2007; Heller 2011)? Steve Dalachinsky

offered his theory of why I was “bound” to tread the same ethnographic ground as other jazz researchers working in New York (see the Introduction). While I agree with some of Steve’s explanation, I think there is more to it than the small world of New York jazz. In the Intro, I suggested that the disproportionate cultural capital of scene members (in comparison to most members’ economic capital) has something to do with it. While scene members such as Steven Joerg, William Parker, and Matthew Shipp do not enjoy the same amounts of wealth and institutional resources that Wynton Marsalis does (or, for that matter, Herbie Hancock or Vijay Iyer), they possess the cultural capital to make the LES scene a visible and audible presence. Creating a record label devoted to musicians who work in the LES scene, such as Joerg has done, and founding a music festival that showcases avant-jazz, as Patricia Nicholson Parker and William Parker have done, makes the LES scene present and tangible.

The LES scene is invested in constructing a discourse of itself *as* a community, and then disseminating this discourse through performances, sound recordings, and print publications. What Steve Dalachinsky did not directly touch upon is the way that the LES scene projects an image of collectivity and cohesion to an “outsider,” such as an ethnomusicologist who has only limited familiarity with the prominent musicians on the scene. I was drawn to study the scene because of the ways it struck me as a relatively bounded community of listeners, which quality made it particularly attractive to me for the purposes of doing an ethnography of jazz listenership.

I remain convinced that the LES avant-jazz scene *was* a fruitful site for ethnographic inquiry into jazz listening practices because many of its members do in fact

know each other well and interact with each other in multiple capacities. The stylistic attributes of much of what is labeled “avant-jazz” pose productive challenges to the project of music analysis, *because* of the multiple ways that the music does not neatly fit into the epistemological premises of music analysis grounded in Western music notation, even though Western notation and its related music-theoretical concepts form an important part of the musical knowledge of avant-jazz musicians.

In some ways, this dissertation merely proves the starting premises of the project. As I had anticipated, I was able to find plenty of jazz listeners who possess extensive knowledge of jazz discography and engage in rich and somewhat codified practices of talking about their listening and collecting. It was similarly unsurprising to me to observe that most of these avant-jazz listeners interpret the genre as an African American cultural form, and as an aestheticized expression of a particular, historically-situated political consciousness.

In the research and writing process, while I oscillated between studying my field data and reading scholarship, I came to realize a discursive interaction between the LES scene and jazz scholarship that I might have otherwise missed. Defining the discursive relationships among jazz musicians, jazz scholars, and jazz critics has proved challenging for me. How to identify the causal relationships between ideological positions and map the flows of thought and trace their various directions among these three groups of actors? The groups interpenetrate to a significant degree, and this has been the case for most of jazz’s 100-year history. Do jazz scholars report on the phenomena they observe in jazz art worlds – music-making, recording, reception/criticism, various relations of

production? Often. Yet for decades jazz musicians have worked within the realm of U.S. academic life, producing both music and literature occupying various points along the scholarly-journalistic continuum (Anthony Braxton and George Lewis immediately come to mind as prolific producers of both). Jazz performance programs now form a standard facet of music departments in American colleges, playing a significant role in the cultural and financial economies of jazz worlds.

Above I use the acoustics-based metaphors of “resonance” and “reverberation” to describe the motivations of LES scene members in listening to, performing, and reproducing the genre of avant-jazz. Now, I will deploy those metaphors once again to consider a related but distinct realm of cultural production. I have found that political theorist William Connolly’s concept of *resonance machines* provides a helpful means of understanding the relationship of discourses among jazz musicians, scholars, and critics.

“Rather, in politics diverse elements infiltrate into the others, metabolizing into a moving complex—Causation as resonance between elements that become fused together to a considerable degree” (Connolly 2005:870)

“It is pertinent to see how figures such as Bush and O’Reilly dramatize the resonance machine. But while doing so, it is critical to remember that they would merely be oddball characters unless they triggered, expressed, and amplified a resonance machine larger than them. They are catalyzing agents and shimmering points in the machine; their departure will weaken it only if it does not spawn new persona to replace them.” (Connolly 2005:877)

To me, Connolly’s formulation effectively provides an alternative to metaphors of “mirroring” or “reflecting,” which imply a congruity between objects or phenomena. Though Connolly first expounded his conception of the resonance machine using a

negative example, the concept itself is value-neutral.¹⁰ To say that the resistive political agenda of a large body of jazz scholarship “reflects” the sensibility of struggle shared by many practitioners of experimental jazz comes too close to viewing those scholars as vessels that receive the intellectual content shared with to them by musicians. I don’t think this is quite what happens. I believe that what has happened in U.S. jazz art worlds resembles the *kind* of interaction Connolly describes as occurring between aggressive forms of capitalism and Evangelical Christianity, an interaction that forms a resonance machine.

Jazz musicians interested in musically pushing the outer boundaries of the genre often construed this aesthetic work as an expression of resistance against structures of power and social oppression. Not surprisingly, scholars of expressive forms whose work traces the ways that social discourses of class, race, gender, and sexuality become encoded in aesthetics would be sympathetic to the various types of cultural production the jazz avant-garde has undertaken. The idea of a resonance machine suggests a process of mutual amplification, of sympathetic vibrations. The struggles of African American experimentalists resonate with scholars who wish to do politically-engaged work. Those struggles have particularly resonated with students of African American culture and jazz history who wish to provide revisionist narratives that counter various tropes that continue to hold sway even in the current historical moment. These include the trope of black music as merely entertainment (as opposed to a sophisticated art-form), persistent

¹⁰ Connolly has also described the ways that social progressives could assemble “positive” resonance machines (Connolly 2013).

notions that African American men are predisposed to criminality (witness the killings of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis in 2012), as well as the stubborn survival of “blame the victim” ideologies that argue that systemic poverty and social marginalization among ethnic minorities in the US fundamentally stem from the laziness, irresponsibility, or essential inabilities of the minorities themselves.

I am wholly sympathetic to scholarship invested in correcting inaccurate and injurious historical narratives and prejudicial tropes. As Gabriel Solis notes in the quotation above, jazz scholars seem to *love* to write about the jazz avant-garde. This continued predilection for a particular topic is not in the sign of a “problem” in the field. But I see the ongoing preoccupation of a good number of jazz scholars with the jazz avant-garde as symptomatic of a slippage that is both theoretical and methodological. The problem I have observed lies in a tendency to produce scholarly accounts that propound the agendas and ideologies of the jazz avant-garde while including little or no critical examination of those agendas and ideologies. To be sure, some scholarship has reported on the historical events and aspirations of the avant-garde and provided analysis of the various motivations and actions that made the history *without* slipping into a rhetoric of championship or the prescriptive tone of a manifesto (Anderson 2007; Monson 2007; Piekut 2011; Porter 2002). Moreover, with few exceptions (which I discuss below) I do not take particular issue with any single article, edited collection, or monograph that deals with the post-1960 avant-garde tradition in jazz. My misgivings center on the sum total of this scholarship and its prominence in jazz studies for at least fourteen years.

I cannot identify a specific moment or period when the avant-jazz musician/jazz scholarship resonance machine activated itself, but I believe the resonance machine kicked into overdrive in the wake of PBS' airing of Ken Burns' *Jazz* documentary. Within the next couple of years, a barrage of scholarly critiques appeared in books and journals, ranging from meticulous discussions of the numerous factors that went into the production of *Jazz* to reactionary attacks against the film (DeVeaux 2011; Jacques 2001; Kelley 2001; Kodat 2003; Lipsitz 2004; Pond 2003; Porter 2002). Understandably, the community of jazz scholars wanted to voice disappointment and concern over a popular text that disseminated an extremely partial and ideologically loaded narrative of jazz history. The critiques discussed Wynton Marsalis, director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, creative consultant for the film's production, and prominent "talking head" in the finished product, as much as they did the film itself.

The resonance machine arising from the mutual interaction of jazz scholars, critics, and musicians did its work. Scholars paid attention to critics and musicians who were outraged by the Burns film and by Marsalis' hegemonic status. In giving these dissenting opinions a platform, scholars amplified them (Currie 2009; Gray 2005; Isoardi 2006; Lewis 2008; Pond 2005; Rustin and Tucker 2008). Several LES scene participants had some level of familiarity with academic writing on jazz; as a result, their view of Marsalis as a monolithic antagonist were validated.

The other side of the coin in these denunciations of Marsalis and Burns was a tendency to advocate for avant-garde jazz in the mode of a critic or fan. Some jazz scholarship on the avant-garde began to reproduce the stories the musicians told about

themselves. This work amplifies the sentiments of the musicians, rather than performing critical analysis of their discourses and practices. Such critical analysis could remain sympathetic to the aspirations of jazz musicians while providing more nuanced scholarly accounts.

Taken as a whole, out of the preoccupation with the avant-garde a master narrative has emerged within jazz studies over the past decade. This is ironic, since so many of the scholars who have written about the avant-garde have done so in order to *counter* and overthrow a more conservative master narrative that constructs jazz history as a succession of great individuals.¹¹ Schematically, this “contra-master” narrative props up the emergence of the jazz avant-garde in the 1960s as an ongoing moment that continues to the present day. The effect is eerily similar to the view of LES scene participants. By continually championing avant-garde jazz and arguing for a revised jazz canon that includes more space for the avant-garde, and especially by implying the New Thing remains the “newest thing” in jazz, this line of thinking paradoxically constructs the 60s/70s avant-garde as a kind of endpoint in jazz history.

This master narrative persists up to the current day, with the 2013 publication of two books focused upon post-1960s jazz (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013; Heble and Wallace 2013). These most recent works of avant-jazz championship reach a new level of shrillness in their condemnation of Marsalis and vaguely-defined musical and academic

¹¹ McCormack’s critique of “transcendence,” quoted above, links the trope of the “transcendent individual” to “great-man” histories of jazz.

mainstreams, which the authors claim, are apathetic or hostile towards avant-garde jazz.

This passage from *The Future of Jazz Is Now!* is indicative:

It is our contention that despite the sometime replication of oppressive social structures, to the detriment of more hopeful and helpful social elements, and despite supposed critical and popular insignificance, the music and cultural conditions stemming from the so-called New Thing (and subsequent related movements) [*it remains unclear to me what subsequent movements the authors refer to here*] are sites of provocative and often positive social relations and antihegemonic practice. (5)

How far does that antihegemonic practice reach, beyond the musicians performing? The following excerpts from *The Fierce Urgency of Now* illustrate both the authors' idealistic notion of avant-garde jazz's radical potential and their hyperbolic attack on straw men in academia.

"In its most fully realized forms, improvisation is the creation and development of new, unexpected, and productive cocreative relations among people. It teaches us to make 'a way' out of 'no way' by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances. Improvisers work with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them, in order to imbue the world with the possibility of making right things happen." (xii)

"The silo mentality of academic disciplines, then, which resists or prohibits thinking of music as a form of social practice with wider implications and that imagines rights struggles as being disaffiliated from creative forms of expression, is something we challenge throughout this book." (xx)

If the field of jazz studies wishes its future to be as intellectually ripe as so much of the scholarship it has produced during the past twenty years, jazz scholars need to tell history as it happened, happy stories and sad. We need to report on how people actually hear jazz, rather than suggest how they should hear it. We need to beware the lure of "feel-good" narratives of redemption, resistance, and transcendence.

Requiem for a Heavy Listener, or, Re: Person I Knew

To bring this dissertation to a close, I offer a meditation on how my fieldwork experience *itself* shifted my understanding of the affects that fuel the desires to listen and to hold vigil. This is not a conversion narrative in either a literal or metaphorical sense. But it is my way of bearing witness.

On the morning of 2 March 2013, as I browsed my Facebook feed, the following post, by Ras Moshe, caught my attention:

Rest in peace brother Peter Stanley Cox.

A great supporter of the music and a great friend.

Then came the comments on Ras' post: some expressing grief at the news, others recalling Cox's consistently-positive attitude at gigs and his inveterate support of "this music." The brief eulogies and acknowledgments of Cox's passing on Facebook provide vivid proof of how "the listener" is a cultural figure invested with significant symbolic capital within the LES avant-jazz scene. Musicians on the scene mourned Cox's loss; violinist/composer Jason Kao Hwang commented that he and William Parker had recently visited Cox and found him in good spirits.

For Cox to have been "a supporter of this music," his listening practices and presence on the scene had to impact those around him - other avant-jazz aficionados and musicians. Cox was representative of scene members' potential to wield agency. Peers treated Cox as an individual who had some say in the matter of avant-jazz, of musical sound, and hence of the sociality and social relations that coalesce around, are enacted within, and derive from that musical sound.

About a week later, on the phone with Steve Dalachinsky, I expressed my condolences. I'd first heard about Cox from Dalachinsky, who mentioned a friend on the scene, 'another guy who's heavy into the music and who's very ill.' I soon made this friend's acquaintance and eventually learned to expect Peter Cox's presence at many of the musical performances I would be attending. He was a consistent presence at the Monday-night RUCMA shows held in the Local 269; he was there at the Vision Fest, the In-Gardens concerts. We barely knew each other beyond a mutual acknowledgment that each was somehow invested in avant-jazz. We would always smile and say hello, and on a few occasions struck up casual conversation about the music we'd just heard together, or perhaps recordings we both admired.

Steve told me that he expected a memorial for Cox to be held at St. Peter's Church in midtown Manhattan. St. Peter's devotes significant energy to showcasing and commemorating the efforts of jazz musicians; participants in New York jazz scenes know it as "the jazz church."¹² Steve contrasted Cox's reputation at the time of his death to jazz musicians who had grown obscure enough to die with barely any acknowledgment, let alone a memorial service at St. Peter's. He said that while Cox was not as important a listener and advocate of experimental music as Irving Stone ("It's not like anyone's gonna name a club after him," Steve said, referring to the Stone, a venue named for Irving Stone), Cox was part of an inner circle of hardcore listeners. Steve no longer considered himself a member of this circle because his concert-going regimen had grown more relaxed in the last several years.

12 <http://www.saintpeters.org/jazz/memorials/>

I asked Steve if he knew what Cox's profession or occupation had been. "What did he do?" Steve thought aloud. A couple seconds of silence. "You know, I don't know what he did. I never asked. I guess it never occurred to me." None of the Facebook posts or comments about Cox's death said anything about an occupation. Within the LES scene, Cox's vocation was that of listener.

The Facebook comments on Ras' eulogy post move in the direction of categorizing Cox as a listener, but they steer clear of reducing his social persona to his auditory capacity. They pay tribute to his warmth and compassion as a human being, but the way others perceived this compassion was through the evidence Cox gave of his devotion to improvised music: his constant attendance of performances, his kind and encouraging words to musicians. The mourning of his death is about the loss of an expert listener, a "heavy" listener, but also of an ethical, compassionate human being.

While still engaged in fieldwork, I intended to delve into deeper conversation with Cox at some point. I suppose I even might have asked to interview him. Honestly I cannot remember at this point. These possibilities were forestalled when, in early 2010, my father was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer. The news came on the evening of 31 March, just after I had finished recording a conversation with perennial listeners and LES scene participants Roberta and Richard Berger. They were enthusiastic about being interviewed *again* based upon their visible presence as listeners, since they had already been interviewed by Tom Greenland for his dissertation research (Greenland 2007).

§

The Bergers and I sit at a table on the upper floor of the Whole Foods market on

Houston St and the Bowery. It's a spacious café/food court area, and fairly empty at about 6pm on a weeknight. We've been warming up, getting the conversation going with little bits and pieces of talk. Roberta interviews me during the first ten minutes of the recording. Richard tells me about an old friend from high school who turned him onto jazz, would play him new recordings, tell him what he *had* to check out. Richard and Roberta laugh as they remember their initial reactions to the strange sounds of the jazz avant-garde. They worked to hear this music. Our conversation begins to achieve a kind of crackle. Their voices swell with pleasure as they retrieve items from their collections of aural memories. A pleasure begins to swirl through my body. I feel like I know what's happening now. Previous fieldwork encounters flicker in my mind, I connect those moments to this thing happening here, this loose, unselfconscious dialogue.

I ask the Bergers to think of music recordings that have remained meaningful to them over the years; I purposely use the ambiguous word "meaningful" to allow them room in their responses. Roberta names Thelonious Monk's 1956 album *Brilliant Corners*. She associates the album with "solitude," specifically Monk's solitude during his process of composing music. Paradoxically, as she continues to narrate her notion of the album, she puts an image to the "solitude" she mentioned. She pictures herself with Monk in a room with a piano, listening to him create music. "It's very intimate."

Roberta decides it's Richard's turn. He begins with an introductory statement: "Before I go any further, I have to pay homage to one person, who's not a *jazz* person, but he's probably gotten me through more in my life than anybody, and that's Neil Young."

As soon as Richard hits the word "anybody" Roberta joins in with an elongated

“Aaah” of recognition. Their speech overlaps for a few seconds.

Richard

Roberta

He’s one of my main men.

Aaaah . . . Neil.

And I adore him.

We love Neil!

I *love* everything he does. I just had
to get that on the record.

[*chuckles*]

“Now we can move on to jazz,” Richard says quickly, almost as an apology. I encourage him to keep talking about Young.

Richard: There have been times that I’ve been on the edge, where I didn’t know if I was gonna make it till the next day, if I wanted to make it till the next day. I might be exaggerating, but that’s the way it felt to me. Like I was in such a dark place that I felt like I would not come out of it . . . and that I didn’t know what was gonna happen. But the music of Neil Young helped me survive. *He* brought me *through*. I’d put Neil Young, *After the Gold Rush* on, which to me is one of the greatest albums ever recorded—

Roberta: Oh, I *love* that

Richard: —and it just, everything about it just makes me wanna stay alive, so I can *hear* it again. That’s how important it is to me. In other words, I wouldn’t wanna *not* listen to that again. I wanna know that tomorrow I could put Neil Young on. So I have to be *alive* to be able to hear that—

Roberta: It’s *incentive*!

Richard: —so it would make me wanna be here.

Heavy words, and Richard knows it. I ask how often he listens to Young. “All the time, every day.” Up to now, Richard struck me as warm and friendly, but introverted. In contrast to Roberta who greets with a big voice and open arms, Richard’s greetings would consist of a quiet smile, a handshake, and a mellow “How ya doin?” Tonight, Richard understood that he had an opportunity to tell his own story about music and its role in his life.

Richard

Roberta

Now, I just wanna interject, I
would think, you have told me
in certain ways . . . that Neil
Young’s voice embodies angst
for you.

Yeah, yes. His voice *is* like that.

So that’s it,
it’s like it *embodies*, I guess,
what you feel at those
moments. Cause we both cry
all the time to Neil Young.

He has that cry. He has . . .
something in his voice

Yeah!

that’s so emotional.

I mean he’s almost like a vibration.

Matthew: If you’re in a dark place, how does listening to the sound of angst help you
get out of that?

Richard

Roberta

It doesn’t necessarily help me get
out of it. It just helps me .
along. It helps me get through
that day—

Now, I just wanna interject, I
would think, you

—like you know he feels it too, he
felt it too—

—right, I’m not alone

I’m not alone.

Someone else feels that way and
was able—

—and has gotten through.

—and was able to put it down on
paper or on a record so that—
and if he survived, then maybe
I could survive. It helps me that
way.

Roberta and Richard highlighted the sound of Young’s voice, the high, almost reedy tenor that lives in the popular music imaginary as an icon of Young’s life of music-making.¹³ Young’s voice has become iconic due to its idiosyncratic timbre. In contrast, for instance, to the “sweet,” smooth crooning style of James Taylor or the bell-like clarity and finely-modulated vibrato of Joni Mitchell’s singing (both contemporaries of Young and fellow singer-songwriters), Young seems to deliberately allow imperfections and irregularities of vocal tone production to come through in his singing. When he uses it, his vibrato is fast, at times wide enough to suggest that he may veer off-pitch (though Young is able to achieve precise intonation when he wishes). When Young sings at the top of his range, he consistently pushes against the boundaries of his modal register and

¹³ Comedian Jimmy Fallon recently performed an impersonation of Neil Young, alongside the actual Bruce Springsteen, on his late-night comedy show. At the crux of Fallon’s impersonation were a wide-brimmed hat similar to those worn by Young, a steel-string acoustic guitar strumming block chords, and Fallon’s uncanny mimicking of Young’s voice and singing style. This performance has become popular enough on youtube.com to make it one of the top hits for searching “Neil Young,” above many videos of Young himself. The reception of this skit as successful humor (evidenced both by the studio audience’s laughter and the popularity of the Youtube) illustrate the canonicity of Young’s tenor.

rarely shifts to falsetto.¹⁴ This causes Young's highest notes to take on a shrill timbre that suggests wailing or yelling (the "cry" that Richard and Roberta talk about).

Richard and Roberta felt an affinity for the stylistic *roughness* of Neil Young's singing. In sharing and narrating their appreciation of Neil Young's music, Richard and Roberta aurally register *roughness* as a sonic expressive quality unrestricted by musical genre. Richard said that for him the sound of Neil Young's singing voice represents "angst." He feels pleasure at hearing a sonic expression of angst in part because this aural experience has a consoling effect upon him; someone else in the world also feels doubt and anxiety, copes with feelings of emotional turmoil. Linking the "cry," the "something...so emotional," in Young's voice to the affect of "angst," Richard experiences the roughness of Young's voice as *personally* meaningful. That roughness is not merely an object in the world that he considers pleasing. He has created a deeply-felt relationship between the sound of Young's voice (and, I suggest, Young's electric guitar) and his sense of himself as a subject. As he speaks to me in the present, Richard's memories of struggles with substance abuse and depression weave through memories of previous hearings of Neil Young. He feels empathy for Young and imagines Young would reciprocate this empathy. The "angst" in Young's singing has become *sincere* and *authentic* in a very "real" way for Richard because he has interpreted it as giving sonic form to emotional and

¹⁴ "Modal" refers to the register humans use most frequently in everyday life (one's "regular" speaking voice) and is usually the register singers in various American music styles (country, folk, jazz, rock, soul) most often. See (Ronald Lewcock et al.).

existential struggles similar to his own.¹⁵ During these intensified moments of listening, Richard temporarily bridges the gap between his Self and an Other.

Having said his piece on Neil Young, Richard shifted the topic to jazz recordings, and brought up a recording of importance to him.

Richard: There is a recording that I play . . . so many times that it's . . . it's *amazing*.
[Roberta chuckles]

MS: What is it?

Richard: I'm gonna tell ya and- because I like I love Monk I love Billie Holiday I love so many different people, and *this* artist is *not* my favorite . . . but this CD of his . . . it's called "The Gentle Side of John Coltrane."

Right here I want to pause the flow of the conversation to note Richard's framing and delivery of this recording citation. He builds up to the revelation that he cherishes this compilation of Coltrane recordings because he is aware of Coltrane's deeply canonical status within most jazz cultures, including the avant-jazz traditions. There was a hint of hesitation in the way Richard came around to citing his affection for the *Gentle Side* compilation; mixed with his qualification that he loves "so many different people," this hesitation speaks to his awareness that others within the LES jazz scene might look askance at his ambivalence towards most of Coltrane's recordings.¹⁶

¹⁵ Here I am employing Michael Jackson's argument that it is in moments of crisis and extreme instability that humans tend to experience their lives as most "real" - that is, most intensely perceived and felt (Jackson 2009: 37).

¹⁶ Richard did not cite any recordings, but the canonization process itself and shared knowledge about jazz recordings that it yields enable me to conjecture that he would have in mind any of the following: Coltrane's various recordings of the tune "My Favorite Things," his quartet recordings of 1965, or post-1965 albums such as *Ascension*, *Om*, or *Meditations*, which all document Coltrane's experimentation with ensemble configurations beyond the quartet as well as his decisive moves away from clearly defined and hierarchized rhythmic meter and into deeper explorations of harmonic dissonance and timbral extremes - in short, his full embrace of the jazz avant-garde that had come into full bloom by 1965.

Ro: I don't think that's true for everybody. . Some people are *closed off*.

Ri: [*laughing*] No, no . . I was being a little facetious there. It just touches my soul.

[Ro: Yeah] The way Neil Young touches my soul, and the way Bob Dylan touches my soul . . *that* "Soul Eyes" touches my soul. It's just like— I plug into it. And no matter—even if I'm feeling *lousy*, it's *alright*—

MS: Are there specific *sounds* in it . that you—that, like . Coltrane?

Ri: The *melody* of the song is *beautiful*. It's a *beautiful* melody. And the way it flows . and the way Coltrane takes the solo and the piano comes in. And- just the *whole* . . the whole progression of the song is just . it's wonderful. It's like . it's *heavenly*. When I hear that I feel like . . and I can be *down* and it's alright. I can be happy down. [Roberta laughs] I feel like there's *hope* . when I hear that.

MS: Yeah yeah yeah.

Ro: Yeah, happy down's okay.

Ri: -like there's *hope*. And that even if I feel lousy and I wanna jump off the roof I don't *have* to jump off the roof—

Ro: [*laughing*] —Matt's getting a look at your cheerful side tonight. [all laugh]

Ri: No, I'm being . . I'm being very *honest* here.

Richard summed up his thoughts and feelings about Coltrane's "Soul Eyes" recording:

Ri: But when I listen to "Soul Eyes" I feel like [*almost laughing*] there's a *chance* here. There's a chance. If this music exists in the world, there's gotta be a way to get [MS: There's something] something worth . *living* for. [Roberta: Yes!!] If somebody could create this write and then they play it . [Roberta: Right] and it touches me so deeply [Roberta: Yeah] there's gotta be more here than meets the eye.

Ro: Or more than you feel when you're down—

Ri: —more than I feel yeah—that's the way—that's how I feel about it.

Roberta was familiar with Richard's fondness for Coltrane's recording of "Soul Eyes." Bits and pieces of informal conversation revealed that she was willing to construe their shared love of music as something that helped define their marriage and

relationship. During the conversation I recount here, Roberta said that she and Richard always say they met over Keith Jarrett (referring to their first encounter in J&R Music World while a Jarrett recording played on the store's sound system). On another occasion, Roberta told me, with an ambivalent laugh in her voice, that as they had borne no children, they consider "the music" their child.

§

As the Bergers both spoke about the aural pleasure of listening to music, they exhibited a pleasure in the very act of *telling* and *sharing* these aural experiences. Though somewhat hesitant at first, once Richard started talking about Neil Young and John Coltrane, he got into a verbal groove. Though they framed their talk as being "about" Richard's feelings and fondness for Neil Young and "Soul Eyes," this talk was a collaborative effort. Roberta tossed in brief commentary, fleshed out details, and generally helped Richard maintain the groove. If Richard ended up taking a long solo during our conversation, Roberta was with him as an accompanist. She glossed what he was saying like a pianist inserting substitute chords, she used the words "yeah" and "right" to encourage him like a drummer places irregular accents (as known as "dropping bombs") to spur on a soloist.

Together, the couple put Richard's periods of drug addiction and his chronic bouts with depression or dysthymia on the ethnographic table. Commercially released sound recordings – publicly circulating commodities – had shaped their most intimate spaces of emotion and memory. In turn, Roberta and Richard were bringing their ostensibly private feelings into public circulation by telling me about them, with the

understanding that their words might eventually appear in articles or a book.

I did not feel any awkwardness during this conversation, nor I do think the Bergers did. We began to rise from our table and put on coats and collect ourselves, marking the end of the official “interview.” I alerted the Bergers that the recorder was still running. As we continued to chat in a more informal register, there was a moment of meta-conversation in which Roberta remarked on how “deep,” “heavy” and “personal” the conversation had gotten. We agreed that it made sense for our talk to go into those places.

§

From East Houston Street and 2nd Avenue, we travel southeast to a place on Orchard Street, near Delancey, to hear our friend and fellow scene member Brad Farberman play a set. Just after we enter the place and say hello to Brad, my phone rings.

The small mass on my father’s lung is actually the primary site of an advanced, metastatic cancer.

I’m outside the bar, standing on the street, trying to hear above the noise of cars. I feel like I’ve just woken up.

I walk back into the club and apologize to Brad, Richard, and Roberta, explaining that I have to leave. Roberta asks if something has happened. Richard is listening too. “My dad is sick and my mom is worried.” Gravity tugs a bit harder on the skin of their faces.

§

Sometime later that evening, the eerie confluence made itself known to me: from Richard’s tribute to the music he loved as something that had maintained his will to live

to a phone call about a sudden question of life and death. The flow of events had brought us together into a realm of mutual social intimacy around the topic of death, typically a conversational taboo in the United States. My latest fieldwork interview had ventured into a realm of social intimacy and my interlocutors and I were talking about mortality, one's will to live and how listening to music fit into it. We had gotten down to brass tacks. This intimacy "in the field" was interrupted by a more personal intimacy: my unexpected confrontation with my father's mortality. The next day we spoke on the phone and I explained the situation in greater detail. Among other words of encouragement and support they offered, Roberta observed that Peter Cox had been surviving bone cancer for three years.

Richard, Roberta and I are all native New Yorkers from ethnic backgrounds stereotypically associated with gregarious social style and direct, overt conversational style – Italian in Roberta's case, Jewish in Richard's and mine. While stereotypes often reduce the complexities and wide range of differences that exist within a given social formation (such as "Southerners" or "Latinos") culturally-learned and -situated differences in social style are of course a plain reality. Talking openly and directly about topics some might find potentially awkward, the "rough edges" of life such as negative emotions, addiction, or death, was acceptable, even comfortable, conversational terrain for us.

As we left the Whole Foods market, I humorously noted that I thought I'd managed to ask about different topics from those Tom Greenland had covered in his dissertation. Roberta compared our interview to the one Greenland conducted with them:

“I don’t really remember discussing things in the same way. You’re more . . . reaching into theory of things, you’re reaching in a circle. He was going more on a road.”

Being interviewed for another dissertation would further confirm their status as “hardcore” jazz listeners - people with the kind of cultural capital possessed by Peter Cox, Irving and Stephanie Stone, and other “heavy” listeners. Once my recorder was running and we had opened up the topics of their biographies within a socially acceptable realm of talk, the interview, our compatible styles of talk and social interaction facilitated our move into “serious” personal subject matter.¹⁷ The existing frame of the interview may have worked along with Richard and Roberta’s desire to cultivate and further refine their public status as dedicated listeners. They wanted to continue to narrate their aural experiences. With gentle prompting from me, Richard used poetic descriptions of his feelings about beloved recordings to help construct and convey portions of an autobiographical narrative.¹⁸ Within the milieu of the LES avant-jazz scene, in which devoted listening is a respected skill, they wanted to give their accounts of the vital role music (regardless of style or genre) has played in their lives. They wanted to make their witness.

§

Among other ethnographers who have debunked the fallacy of imagining a

¹⁷ Charles Briggs (*Learning How to Ask*) highlights how interviews are understood by those involved as a type of speech event or genre with certain expectations or rules. Both interviewer and interviewee come to the event with ideas of how it is supposed to go.

¹⁸ Tia DeNora explores similar instances in which people use the sounds of recorded music in processes of “self-making.” DeNora conceives of music as a “technology of self” and writes: “[in] this stock-taking of ‘who one is’ or ‘where, interpersonally, one has been,’ one registers one’s self to one’s self as an object of self-knowledge, in the aesthetic construction that is memory” (DeNora 2000:65).

separation between “fieldwork” and “real life,” Steven Feld and Renato Rosaldo have both written accounts of the ways in which their understanding of and relationship to their ethnographic subjects were fundamentally shaped by the “intrusion” of their real lives into fieldwork. In both cases, these intrusions involved the experience of loss. For Feld, it was the wistfulness he felt after the departure from Bosavi of his friends and fellow ethnographers: he missed them (Feld 1982:231, ff.). Feeling sadness over the absence of his friends, Feld wept in front of his Kaluli interlocutors and realized that, “the sight of me weeping went a lot further to establish for them just what sort of person I might be” (233). He felt had he reached a new plateau in his understanding of Kaluli aesthetics; he had ventured beyond the social functions of Kaluli cultural practices and into the realm of experience, glimpsing how the Kaluli lifeworld feels:

Illuminating experience (and not only function) and co-aesthetic witnessing can only be accomplished honestly if ethnographers let themselves feel and be felt as emotionally involved people who have an openly nondetached attitude about that which they seek to understand. (Feld 1982: 236)

For Rosaldo, it was the unexpected death of his wife and fellow ethnographer during fieldwork (Rosaldo 2014). Only after this loss did Rosaldo understand, on an experiential level, why Ilongot men’s grief might lead to rage that drives them to headhunt. His personal loss effected both a reinterpretation of field data – “what Ilongots had told me about their grief, rage, and headhunting” (122) – and a reassessment of ethnographic method. Rosaldo calls for greater attention to subject position in ethnography, to how an ethnographer’s own life experience can both enhance and limit his interpretation of phenomena observed in the field. In an argument similar to Feld’s

call for a “nondetached attitude,” Rosaldo writes:

Whether resulting from notions of objectivity or dogmas about the indeterminacy of inner states, ethnographies that eliminate such qualities as anger, lust, and tenderness both distort their descriptions and remove potentially key variables from their explanations. (Rosaldo 2014: 129)

While Richard was talking about his profound affection for Neil Young and Coltrane’s “Soul Eyes,” I *thought* I understood what he was describing. But later that same night, after receiving news about my father’s grim diagnosis, I began to understand on a different basis. I now hear the recording I made with the Bergers as a prelude to the phone call from my parents. I cannot listen to Richard talk about his struggles with addiction and moments of extreme and implicitly suicidal despondency without thinking of his words as a kind of conceptual print-through (Porcello 1998) of the conversation my parents and I had later that night, and those that took place over the following months. This does not make “logical” sense. But for me it makes existential sense. I realize that the two moments are connected for me because the question of mortality ran through both. But I cannot explain why I experience them as connected in some more fundamental way. It was a moment in which I confronted what Kathleen Stewart would call an “ordinary affect” and what Michael Jackson calls “the quandaries of everyday life,” arguing that

...it is necessary to constantly remind ourselves of the limits to which existence can be subject to reason, and to open ourselves up continually to that which lies beyond our grasp, embracing a tragic view of life that refuses the idea of implicate orders or intelligible design but also recognizes that life would be insufferable without such illusions. (Jackson 2007:xi)

In addition to wanting a drink when I got home from seeing the Bergers, I wanted to hear music. I put one of Aretha Franklin’s late-’60s Atlantic albums. It was just as Richard said of Neil Young. It wasn’t that the tight grooves of the instrumentalists and

Franklin's impassioned singing "brought me out" of my feelings of anxiety, frustration and fear. I didn't momentarily forget that my father's terminal cancer was going to cause a massive shift in my life-world, that this shift had *already* begun. The music "helped me along."

Ethnographic and historical music scholarship has documented various settings in which heightened moments of music audition can cause a feeling of euphoria.¹⁹ Various musical practices have developed and circulated poetics and metaphors of transformation, transcendence, some sort of experience during which one feels somehow taken out of or away from one's ordinary, mundane reality. I believe that the persistence and naturalization of this kind of discourse within Western societies, and among the hard and social sciences, leads to the derogation that many whose livelihood revolves around music have been subject to: that music is a "pleasure," an "entertainment," that it provides an "escape." These kinds of statements contribute to the systematic instrumentalization of music-making (and other expressive forms) in global neoliberalism, placing music and other artistic pursuits in an auxiliary position to the "real-life" stuff that should occupy human time: the production of goods and surplus capital.

My contention is that we need to think carefully before reiterating claims about the "healing," "redemptive," "transformative," or "transcendent" powers of music. I still believe that music can affect human experience in those positive ways, and I can attest to

¹⁹ Within jazz studies, this has often centered on theories about the nature of "groove" and remains largely grounded in the realm of the secular. Ethnomusicologists have also studied the experiential aspects of sacred musical practices and the altered states they produce (see, e.g., Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners*; Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira*; Friedson, *Dancing Prophets*).

experiencing such moments. Rather, I think critical and scholarly work on music, especially that which views music as a social practice, needs to move away from that kind of rhetoric because it can so easily be usurped by neoliberalist ideology and reformulated as the basis for considering expressive forms (arts) to be a superfluous superstructure, a frilly, frothy coating floating atop the real substance of human life.

In Richard's case and in mine, music was not an "escape from reality," a sonic "eject button" for existence. The pleasures and even affective nourishment of listening lie within and are intrinsically part of our lives. Moments of heightened listening do not occur within another plane of reality. They occur within *this* reality – the only one each of us knows.

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Note: Original release dates of reissued recordings are provided in [brackets].

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Biography

Matthew Anton Somoroff was born on 27 October 1980 in New York City and grew up in the borough of Queens. He began playing trumpet at age 11 and became interested in jazz at about age 15. In May 2002, he graduated *magna cum laude* from New York University with a B.A. in Music, and was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. In 2005 he earned a M.A. in Musicology from Queens College (CUNY). His doctoral work has been supported by the James B. Duke Fellowship, the Anne and Robert Bass Instructorship, the Aleane Webb Dissertation Research Fellowship, and two Summer Research Fellowships, all from Duke University.